



Alternative Schooling in India

Edited by
Sarojini Vittachi and Neeraja Raghavan
with **Kiran Raj**

*With a Directory of
Alternative Schools in India*



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Foreword

Systems of education evolve when alternatives to the mainstream are absorbed by it. When this does not happen and the mainstream resists the assimilation of new ideas, the system ossifies. The situation we face in India has far too many symptoms of resistance to reform for anyone to feel comfortable. As parents, teachers, principals and administrators, we must all worry and find ways to soften the system so as to make it porous enough for the new ideas developed by the seekers of alternatives to slip into the system and germinate there.

This remarkable volume opens up such a possibility.

One thing I am quite sure it will give (to whoever glances at it) is hope. A directory of alternative schools is something we have been looking for. Now that we have one here, I, for one, will not need to maintain a personal directory as I have done for years. The attempt (made by Dr Neeraja Raghavan and her group) to assemble all necessary information about off-beat schools will enhance everyone's awareness of their existence and functioning, and also increase their own reach. Hopefully, it will also inspire others to overcome the natural reluctance one has to initiate an institutionalised innovation.

Apart from a directory, this volume has interviews with students who have studied at alternative schools and with teachers. The questions one typically faces when the word 'alternative' is mentioned in the context of schooling are answered here. Some of these answers renovate our awareness of the terrible limitations of the system and embolden us to imagine ways to overcome these limitations.

India has been fortunate to have educational adventurers of the stature of Gandhi and Tagore. The number of individuals who have walked away from the schools in frustration and confusion is incalculable. Stories of failure run into millions, but there are some which narrate journeys in new, uncharted directions. Usually, it is stories of this kind which foretell the future.

Krishna Kumar

Director

National Council for Educational Research and Training
New Delhi

Acknowledgements

The process of compiling this book was itself an experience in alternative education! In a world where many do not want to part with information even in the NGO and education sectors, where information is power, we were deeply touched by those who freely shared their experiences and information with us.

‘Happy to be of help for such a good cause!’ was what one of our contacts wrote, and doubtless what all of our contacts felt! To illustrate with just one example, we made a long distance call one morning to a number in Kolkata, as it was listed in our database as being the number of an alternative school there. To our dismay, the person who answered our call said that this was not a school, but surprised us by suggesting we give him the name and any other details we had, and call again the next day, by which time he would gather the information for us. Half expecting that this would never happen, we gave the details, and called the next morning; and obtained the telephone number of Mr Anish Basu of Shikshantar, Kolkata! In India many strangers still help each other.

So we do think that it would probably have been near impossible for such a compilation to emerge, without this kind of cooperation from so many, whose only intent was to help in bringing this knowledge out on an open platform, for more and more to read and learn about. Often, we were led on a chain of leads, and it speaks of the helpfulness of the people we acknowledge; and more, even when they did not have the answers to our queries but were willing to give of their time and give us ideas and suggestions for further leads. This was most helpful as we discovered that information was scattered at best, and most of the time there was no information. To the best of our knowledge, a similar directory on alternative education in India does not exist.

How do we thank Carmen Kagal enough for her painstaking and thorough work of editing the manuscript? As and when we sent her sections of the book, she subjected each page to her meticulous editor’s eye, and this book has tremendously benefited

by her scrutiny and changes. When we solicited articles from Gautama, Indira Vijaysimha, Deepti Priya Mehrotra and Asha Sudarshan, they made our task so easy with their instant willingness and speedy responses. When we had a skeleton directory ready, we gingerly sent out requests for its review by leading educationists. Heartwarming was the response: by return mail, we received acceptance of our requests, and so it was reviewed by Anita Balasubramaniam, Beena Choksi, Sheel Parekh and Seetha Anand Vaidyam, to all of whom we owe many thanks.

All of our interviewees gave generously of their time and answered all our questions with patience: to Navroze Contractor, Sheela Gowda, Dhruva, Diba Siddiqi, Shariq and Avinash, we owe our gratitude.

Raji Manoj deserves a special 'Thank you' for the extensive research she helped us with, during the initial phase of this project. But for her persistent efforts, we would not have retrieved information about several schools listed in the volume. In addition, we would like to extend our warmest appreciation to all the heads of schools listed in the Directory, for their unstinted cooperation in answering our queries and patiently reading and re-reading our edited write-ups about their schools. Apart from those who willingly furnished information about their own schools, there were many who put us in touch with several others who were doing fine work.

So, for want of a better way of going about it, we are listing alphabetically the people we would like to thank:

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We would like to add that we owe them all the value of this compilation; any errors, however, are our own.

**Sarojini Vittachi
Neeraja Raghavan**

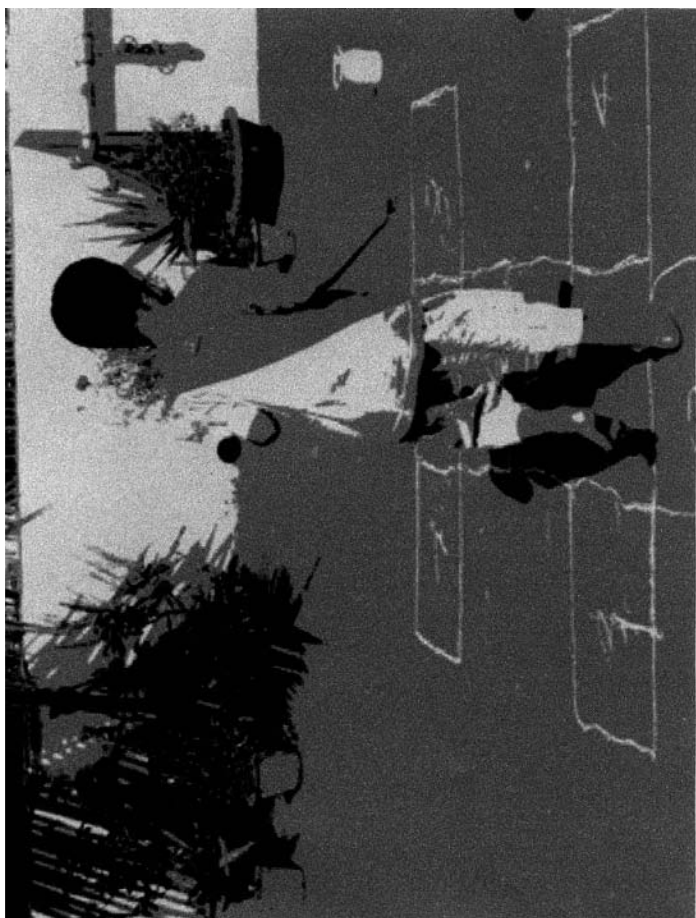


Illustration by Ayisha Abraham

1

Introduction

Sarojini Vittachi

Education is freedom.
From the time of my birth,
Learning new skills, new sounds, new images.

Education is freedom.
Learning in my family,
Learning with my friends,
Learning about birds, trees and many more interesting things.

Education is freedom,
Please, teacher, make it fun,
Make it relate to me,
Help me to learn at my own pace,
Help me to learn new skills,
Help me to learn values for life,
Help me to enjoy reading,
Help me to discover,
To get excited about new knowledge,
And if it helps me to get a job that will be good, too.
But most of all
Help me to be free.

— *Sarojini Vittachi*

This book aims to explore alternative education in its widest meaning of ‘enhancement of education’. It explores the ways in which children can discover their own talents and interests, at their own pace, in their own ways, assisted by teachers, parents, friends and others—learning in and from their neighbours, their village, their community and the environment in which they live.

This book explores how education can be successful in terms of the child's own needs for knowledge, skills and values. This kind of education therefore relies heavily on experiential learning.

What is discussed in the pages that follow covers innovative approaches, methods and ideas of learning, and aims at being child-centred. These ideas have been tested in the schools covered in the 'Directory of Alternative Schools in India'. Some innovative methods and approaches have also been tried in a few mainstream government and private schools.

What is this education an alternative to? It is not rote learning and it does not treat children as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. It is an alternative to priority given solely and exclusively to passing examinations, to achieving results and ranking, to preparing children to 'make it' in today's world using conventional yardsticks of success, such as money and status and getting a good job.

In the essays that follow, we explore what an alternative education means and how it is being implemented in spirit and on the ground.

The beginning point of discussion on relevant and liberating education should include:

- Being *child-focussed*—the child is the centre. The child dictates the pace and interests.
- Allowing learning in multiple ways.
- Enhancing the senses through learning.
- Not being exclusive, as children going to alternative schools also take the (government-prescribed) examinations for school completion. Nor should it be exclusive in terms of class, gender, caste or religion.
- Meeting a child's life-enriching needs in compliance with child-rights, imparting spiritual values, a knowledge of moral, aesthetic and social norms and duties, a sense of self-respect, identity, and an assurance of belonging and companionship. It should further meet life-embellishing needs in music, play and fantasy. And, finally, it should try to meet life-development needs of functional training of innate talents, and vocational education.

The importance of education being child-centred, starting from what the child knows and is interested in, and at the pace preferred by the child, is well illustrated by Arun's true life story.

Arun was 10 years old. He came from a poor family. He kept missing days in his government school. The teacher tried getting him interested in what the class was doing, but he was inattentive. She felt that he had a learning disability. There was a group near the school which helped children after school hours with homework and with revision of the day's subjects. This 'evening school', near the slum where Arun lived, was asked by this teacher if they could spend more time with him and find out why he missed school and was so inattentive. After six months (Arun went regularly to this evening school, never missing a day), the helper there said that Arun assisted his father in repairing bicycles and enjoyed this work. So, the evening school helpers began their programme of complementing the government school's education by starting with what Arun knew and liked: bicycles. From that starting point, he learnt about metals, about physics and chemistry, and he learnt two languages. He then began to follow the lessons in the class in his school, and enjoyed studying and learning new things. Arun grew up to do well in his school-leaving examination, and is now at a university learning engineering—his main passion.

Every child will benefit from education, as illustrated above. Many schools and teachers are engaged in exploring new ways of thinking about education. Anyone can make a shift from traditional methods and take a new look at education and ask how to affect true learning. Alternative education, which this book is about, is an organic and constantly evolving approach to learning. It makes the child the centre and the focus of learning, using a variety of methods and strategies. In summary, alternative education philosophy endeavours to fit the process of learning to the child's inclinations, interests and abilities.

When we say, 'anyone can do it', we mean it. The majority of schools and learning centres in India use traditional practices of teaching and learning, and they, too, can assess and adapt to the approaches and the methods presented in this book. The ideas advocated can be replicated almost anywhere, and can be used, as some are doing, in mainstream (government and private) schools.

The Government of India is seized of this issue and has recently revised the curriculum for schools to make the teaching and learning of subjects more experiential and less by rote. Beginning with an intense review of the current school syllabus and the evolving of a National Curricular Framework, the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) has developed textbooks that make a shift from rote learning to experiential and activity-based learning.

In the 60 years since Independence, the galaxy of eminent scientists, lawyers, doctors and writers that India has produced may give the impression that the overall situation of education is fine in the country. However, millions of Indians continue to be deprived of the opportunity to learn. Literacy is only 65 per cent (with female literacy even lower at 54 per cent) in India. Encouragingly, however, the number of literates has increased by 13 per cent from 1991 to 2001, and, for the first time since Independence, there has been a decline in the absolute number of illiterates during the decade. Education, however, is more than mere literacy. How many children actually go to school? *India Education Report: A Profile of Basic Education*, (edited by R. Govinda, NIEPA, Oxford University Press, 2002) describes the stage-wise progress in school enrolment as well as retention from 1950–51 to 1997–98. *Selected Educational Statistics 2001–2002* (Department of Secondary and Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India) reports a gross enrolment ratio of 96 per cent for children between 6 and 11 years, in 2001–02. However, in 1997–98, the estimated out-of-school children in the age group 6–14 was more than 40 million, of which 27 million (67 per cent) were girls.

The sad truth, then, is that even those who have the opportunity to go to school do not always relish it. Many drop out. Why is this? *The Public Report on Basic Education in India* (The Probe Team, Oxford University Press, 1999) addresses these issues. The report says:

In the absence of much learning at school, the major preoccupation of children, teachers and parents is actually 'coping' with school. Even urban educated parents feel helpless, and often quietly shoulder the burden of tutoring children at home or arranging for private tuition, in their attempt to somehow cope with the demands of the school. Some parents realize that our rigid schooling system seems to dull

their children and stifle their creativity and originality, *but feel trapped with no alternative* [emphases ours]. An exceptional teacher or a privileged school may help nurture the faculties of creativity and critical enquiry among a small minority of children.

It is precisely to bring home the fact that there are indeed alternatives, right here in the country, which are not necessarily only for the more privileged or the highly capable, that this book is being brought out.

This book includes a 'Directory of Alternative Schools in India' illustrating the ideas expressed in the articles and interviews. The goals are the same: learning and discovery of knowledge through experiences of the child. But how these are done—and the strategies and philosophy underlying it—include innovative, experimental, experiential methods always keeping the needs of the child in focus.

Like anything else that is child-friendly, there are no set formulae. Education cannot be a static endeavour. With the philosophy of being child-centred as almost non-negotiable, alternative schools continuously remould themselves so as to bring their students closer to leading a holistic life. It is our hope that the freshness that each innovative educator brings to her learners is felt by you as you read and refer to this book.

OBJECTIVES

We are publishing this Directory for those who wish to explore alternatives to the existing education system in India. This book can be a point of reference and can provide information for networking with those engaged in alternative ways of teaching and learning.

TARGET AUDIENCE

- Parents who desire the full expression (and discovery) of their child's natural talents.
- Teachers who may want to know if there are working environments, which allow them to learn along with their students—at a relaxed and unhurried pace.

- Students who wish to explore unstructured (or loosely structured) ways of learning.
- Educators and researchers who may want to network with others who are engaged in exploring alternatives to the traditional school system.
- For all those who are as yet unaware of these options, this Directory may open new doors.

We believe this is the first such All India Directory of Alternative Schools in print.

DEFINITION OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

While researching for this book, we found it easy to spot the *mainstream schools*, as these were *focussed on results and ranking*. Their success rate was measurable and predictable in bar charts and graphs. They were clear that their alumni had to 'make it' in today's world, preferably by all the usual yardsticks of success: wealth, status and fame.

On the other hand, we found that there were schools that were asking if there was an alternative way of defining 'success'. Did it have to mean running the rat race? Did structures have to rule the individual? Was the end result more important than the process? Did enjoyment and leisure have a higher place than status and wealth? Such schools, for example, saw the value of skills and learning of the child. The schools would teach the same lesson on birds, for instance, in a manner that did not require just memorising the names of birds and their habitats. Instead, the child would be encouraged to listen to the bird, watch it fly, stroke its feathers and develop a love for the bird and its inter-connectedness with nature. Such schools, we found, were more focussed on the *process of learning* rather than solely on the *end result*.

Thus, as our work unfolded, we began to feel the need to define *alternative education*. How, we wondered, were we to decide whether or not to include a school in our list? As we waded through lists of schools, we found that alternative schools generally have one or more of the following features:

- The **Approach** is more individualised than that of a mainstream school. There is no ONE model, and so, the approach of alternative schools defies pigeonholing.
- **Respect** is accorded to the student, parent and teacher irrespective of socio-economic status and (special) abilities. Integration of children of mixed abilities and/or different socio-economic groups, and sometimes even of mixed ages, is a key element.
- **Learning** that is more experiential and interest-based is encouraged rather than learning out of a textbook or from a class lecture.
- **Disciplines** are cross-linked so that the boundaries of knowledge are diffused and the child is able to see connections across various fields of learning.
- **Class size** is kept small. Typically, one teacher does not teach more than 25–30 students.
- **Class structure** is experimented with, by allowing flexibility in the spread of ages or even interflow between different ‘grades’ or ‘standards’ for different subjects. Physical classroom spaces are also broken free of by many so that the walls of the conventional classroom dissolve even as they allow learning to take place outdoors.
- **Administration** is conducted in a democratic and somewhat flexible manner. With hierarchical structures being less and less prevalent, these schools experiment in rotating responsibilities, arriving at major decisions through consensus and taking collective ownership for the institution and what it stands for.
- **Evaluation** methods are explored in various ways, not always relying on conventional tests and examinations.
- **Affiliation** to the most popular Board may not be sought. These schools attempt to explore new topics and syllabi that are not prescribed by conventional Boards. However, this does not mean that such schools do not prepare their students for government-approved examinations to complete schooling and enter universities.

- **Success rate** is not measured only by the performance of the students in competitions, examinations and other such external benchmarks. Their learning outcomes are a blend of measurable and immeasurable parameters.

With these broad guidelines, we have grouped the schools in this Directory as *Alternative*, when the schools make a conscious effort to break free of the boundaries of the traditional education system, whether it is in the aspirations they encourage their students to nurture, the curricula they offer, the administrative systems they employ, the educational methods they explore or the evaluative techniques they invent. Whichever the area, their stress is on exploring *alternatives to that which is widely prevalent*.

METHODOLOGY

The database has been gathered largely through correspondence, with some visits to schools and individuals. As in any research project, we have had to gather data and comb through many names before we could arrive at a short list of schools. While there were far greater 'hits' than 'misses', you will find a complete list of schools that we contacted in the Appendix, of which those who did respond (or were found to fit into our definition) are detailed in the main body of this Directory.

We have not visited all these schools and we make no claims to judge their quality. We bring to you an honest effort to showcase the variety of schools that are engaged in exploring alternatives to existing educational norms. We leave it to you to find out how far they are actually succeeding in their efforts.

While we have tried to provide as much information as possible, we have not been comprehensive in the true sense of the word. This is because India is a large country and it is virtually impossible to cover completely; there may well be many hundreds of such schools doing noteworthy work but may not have come to our notice. The absence of a name in our listing is despite our best efforts. Do write and tell us about any such schools that you know of and we will be pleased to include them in the next edition.

SOME MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

We found, during the course of our work, yet another category of schools that deal practically with the dilemma of reconciling off-beat goals with living in a conventional society. They grapple with the stark reality that their alumni have to finally carve a niche for themselves in today's world, with all its competitiveness and aggression. Therefore, they try to balance societal expectations with simultaneous attempts to infuse their classrooms with some degree of innovation. In the strictest sense, these are mainstream schools, but their focus is not only on results and ranking. We hope to bring out a later edition of this Directory, which also includes these schools under a separate category. However, for those who wonder if there is anything different that can be (or is being) done for mainstream school-goers, we showcase a few projects where innovative ways of teaching and learning are being explored during or after school hours. The chapter 'Come After School' highlights a few such illustrative examples. Again, this is only meant to be an indicator and is not a comprehensive database of such work.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK

In our attempt to give a flavour of these schools, we mixed and blended a number of ingredients before we brewed the final broth. For an initial taste, we briefly outline below the various aspects of this book:

- How did alternative education take root in India? What are its origins? How did it take off? Deepti Priya Mehrotra describes this movement in her article: 'Origins of Alternative Education in India: A Continuing Journey'.
- Someone may well ask questions such as: 'How will a student of an alternative school fit into mainstream society?', 'What are the challenges faced by a person setting out to start an alternative school?' or 'What is the place of examinations in alternative schools?' In the section 'Voices from Practitioners', we invited those with experience of these issues to write to us. Principals of alternative schools and practising educationists have written about a variety of related themes. These illustrate that alternative schooling does not only produce the

artist and the musician, but also can prepare the doctor, the engineer and the scientist for further studies.

- What must it be like for one who has been educated in an alternative school? How does such a person make a living in society? What does it feel like to be a teacher or a parent of a child in an alternative school? Again, we felt that this is best answered by those who went to alternative schools and are now engaged in their own professions. The interviews that are scattered throughout this book are an attempt to bring to our readers the expressions of those who continue to experience the benefits of alternative education.
- Does attendance at an alternative school completely rule out the possibility of sitting for exams? We asked a practitioner to tell us if examinations and alternative schooling had to be mutually exclusive. The article by Asha Sudarshan addresses these concerns and emphasises that exams and alternative schooling are not mutually exclusive.
- Where are these schools in India? How does one contact them if one wishes to explore these alternatives for oneself or for one's child? The 'Directory of Alternative Schools' is our effort to answer this.
- What are the options for those who go to mainstream schools and yet wish to taste the innovations of alternative education? Among the many innovations that have been developed by the non-formal sector of education, Pratham's (Akshara in Karnataka) *Accelerated Reading Programme* has met with widespread acclaim. It combines different approaches to allow a child to learn how to read. This technique has been tried and tested on a large scale. It combines the philosophy of child-centred learning with 'reading aloud' stories and the use of the phonetic charts for coding and decoding sounds. The end result, Pratham says, is very encouraging. Children aged seven years and above, who can read words or letters but not paragraphs, are taught to read simple sentences and stories with comprehension in six to eight weeks, with this cost-effective technique.

The chapter 'Come After School' describes an illustrative set of examples of groups who work with children in their after-school hours, and help enliven their learning.

The Animal School: A Parable

Once upon a time, the animals decided that they must do something decisive to meet the increasing complexity of their society. They held a meeting and finally decided to organise a school.

The curriculum consisted of running, climbing, swimming and flying. The animals decided that all the students should take all the subjects.

The duck proved to be excellent at swimming, better, in fact, than his teacher. He also did well in flying. But he proved to be very poor in running. Since he was poor in this subject, he was made to stay after school to practise it, and even had to drop swimming in order to get more time in which to practise running. He was kept at this poorest subject until his webbed feet were so badly damaged that he became only average at swimming. But average was acceptable in the school, so no body worried about that—except the duck.

The rabbit started at the top of her class in running, but finally had a nervous breakdown because of so much make-up time in swimming—a subject she hated.

The squirrel was excellent at climbing until he developed a psychological block in flying class, when the teacher insisted he start from the ground instead of from the tops of trees. He was kept at attempting to fly until he became muscle-bound—and received a C in climbing and a D in running.

The eagle was the school's worst discipline problem; in climbing class, she beat all of the others to the top of the tree used for examination purposes in this subject, but she insisted on using her own method of getting there.

The gophers, of course, stayed out of school and fought the tax levied for education, because digging was not included in the curriculum. They apprenticed their children to the badger and later joined the groundhogs, and eventually started a private school offering alternative education.

Source: *Internet*

2

Origins of Alternative Education in India: A Continuing Journey

Deepti Priya Mehrotra

‘Education in the true sense is helping the individual to be mature and free, to flower greatly in love and goodness.’

—J. Krishnamurti

IDENTIFYING MULTIPLE ORIGINS

This chapter seeks to describe the movement of alternatives to the existing education systems in contemporary India. It begins with a historical overview, describes early pioneers, and goes on to explore significant initiatives during the past three to four decades. Several early pioneers (during the late colonial period) were ardent nationalists, who tried to revive local languages, literature and cultures, and provide an ethical mooring to the younger generation. The later crop of alternative educationists, 1970s onwards, aimed at deepening democracy—through widening access to all sections of children, and developing students’ critical and creative faculties.

Education is situated within a wider socio-economic and political context—including India’s colonial past, and the ‘globalising’ present. While mainstream schools generally socialise children to fit into status quo structures, alternative education is a pathway to alternative visions and possibilities.

A number of people have set up alternative schools in various parts of the country and have tried to change mainstream education by introducing radically different methods within existing schools. As the alternative education journey continues, its goals are constantly refined and fine-tuned. Yet, the many different exper-

iments in alternative education have certain goals in common. They aim at developing the ‘whole’ human being, rather than just one dimension. Their ambit includes a focus on local and social relevance, ecological awareness, arts and crafts, life skill and accessibility to children with diverse needs. Experiential learning and creative skills are nurtured, and an attempt is made to attend to each child’s unique needs and abilities.

People seek alternatives because they are dissatisfied with the mainstream. My own strong inclination towards alternative schooling has roots in my early years of school life. The experience fuelled my deep need to question conventional school practices and to explore how matters might be differently arranged. Burrowing into personal memory provides a few valuable clues:

1965. All of four years old, I’m bursting with excitement as I wear my new uniform—red checked skirt, starched white blouse, striped tie. I’ve been longing for this day, green with envy as I see my sister leave for school every morning. It turns out, however, to be the worst day of my life. I am forced to sit at a desk, one of a row of small uniformed beings. Silenced, I feel faceless, nameless. The teacher looks at us with lethargy and disinterest. In the cold, unfriendly atmosphere, I lapse into myself and refuse to communicate. The school promptly labels me a ‘problem child’... I survive the ordeal...and devises various strategies...but the scars do not heal easily.

In hindsight, I realised that I was not the only child who found school difficult to cope with. Though I felt isolated then, I now know that there are many children who find it difficult to manage (or survive) their schooling. Many mainstream schools expect standardisation and docile conformity. The atmosphere discourages individual expression and self-directed learning. Teachers, often separated from children by a wide gulf, sit on a pedestal, proclaiming rules, spouting information and evaluating students. Children pursue rigid, examination-oriented syllabi and compete with one another in a relentless race to perform. Camaraderie, cooperation, fun and a love for learning are, unfortunately, casualties.

Such mechanical education can aptly be termed ‘factory schooling’—the aim being to turn out assembly-line products. This happens in authoritarian institutions which train children into unquestioning obedience, paying little attention to individual

needs and interests. Educational content is decontextualised, and much of it is irrelevant.

Alternatives to this kind of education might not constitute a cohesive movement, but inherent in them is a powerful critique of such a system, and the potential for social transformation.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The present mainstream educational system was inaugurated in India in the mid-nineteenth century. Over the next century, it almost completely supplanted earlier educational institutions. There had, earlier, been a wide network of small village schools—*pathshalas*, *gurukuls* and *madarsas*. ‘One village—one school’ was the norm in various parts of the country, up to the early nineteenth century. A large number of such schools—reportedly 100,000 in just Bihar and Bengal around 1835—were kept alive by local support (William Adam 1835, in Dharampal 2000). They played an important social role and ‘were, in fact, the watering holes of the culture of traditional communities’ (Dharampal 2000). Students from various castes studied in these schools—though upper castes must have been disproportionately represented and boys outnumbered girls. Most of the girls learnt a range of skills within their homes: from parents, relatives and private tutors—including arts, crafts, practical skills, agriculture, health, oral literature and languages. In schools, subjects included the three R’s, literature, philosophy, lexicology, religion and grammar. Instruction was imparted in local languages. Harking back to the tradition of monasteries and *ashrams*, schools interspersed training in practical life skills with academic education.

Within the overall context of decline of local economies, these schools went into decline and decay under the colonial rule. Deliberate policy was employed to wipe out this community-based system of schooling, and replace it with an alien model.

In 1931, Gandhi alleged that ‘today India is more illiterate than it was 50 or a 100 years ago’ (M. K. Gandhi 1931, in Dharampal 2000). He added that British administrators had ‘...scratched the soil and begun to look at the root, and left the root like that and the beautiful tree perished.’ Indigenous education was replaced by an alien and rootless system, deliberately set up, as articulated by Lord Macaulay (1835), to ‘form a class who interprets between us

and the millions we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’.

Despite the transfer of power in 1947, Indian schools continued in the same mould. Some changes were introduced: the government expanded its network of schools in both rural and urban areas, and local languages were accepted as the medium of instruction in these schools. Today, we have a vast network of government schools in the country, and a growing number of privately run institutions. Yet, the basic format remained unchanged; a large number of our schools today are based on a derivative, mechanistic model. They are designed to produce individuals who fit into modern society and it’s (consumerist, competitive) values, and are easy to govern since they learn to be highly disciplined within hierarchical, centrally administered institutions. Schooling thus tends to reinforce social inequalities—class, gender and caste. Seldom does it encourage students to ask questions about the status quo or pursue a concern for social justice. The parallel school system perpetuates hierarchies of access: affluent children go to privately run schools, while the poor attend schools run by the State.

Despite vital differences in facilities and funding, all these schools share a similar ethos. Mostly competitive, many of them emphasise external discipline at the expense of inner responsibility. Further, the accent is on absorbing information rather than on original thinking and imagination. The setup is centralised and bureaucratic, teachers distanced from students and most merely doing a job, while the schools act as delivery points for a set curriculum and content. Few students who pass out of these schools love to learn, since they associate learning with boredom and pressure. Schools generate ‘failures’ on a large scale—contributing to a crisis of confidence at the national level.

EARLY PIONEERS

Alternatives to the educational system began to emerge as early as the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Some of these efforts made a significant dent, and their effects are still visible.

Social reformers began exploring alternative education by the late nineteenth century. Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, Syed Ahmed Khan, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Rokeya Shekhawat Hossein and others promoted the idea of education as a force for

social regeneration, and set up schools/institutions towards this end. Vivekananda and Dayanand Saraswati combined religious revitalisation with social service/political work, through the Ramakrishna Mission and Arya Samaj schools, respectively. Syed Ahmed Khan set up the Aligarh Muslim University (originally, Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College), with the goal of imparting modern education without compromising on Islamic values. Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule were actively concerned with overcoming social inequalities. Their work with *dalit* children and girls' schooling, in nineteenth century Maharashtra, disturbed the status quo and earned them brickbats from conservative social forces. Rokeya Shekhawat Hossein, likewise, set up schools for girls in Bengal, challenging hidebound attitudes.

Significant educationists in the first half of the twentieth century included Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi, Jiddu Krishnamurthy, Gijubhai Badheka, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. By the 1920s and the 1930s, these stalwarts had created a number of viable models of alternative education, as a considered response to the ills of mainstream education. Some of these ideas were in alliance with the struggles for national independence and the revitalisation of Indian society. The 'alternatives' emphasised ethical commitments, and reciprocal links between school and society.

Rabindranath Tagore pointed out limitations of schools set up by colonial authorities, in his writings *Shikshar Her Fer* (1893) and *Shikshar Bahan* (1915). In *Shikshar Bikiran* (1933), he favoured Mahatma Gandhi's call for non-cooperation with contemporary education, saying 'there are times when it may be more educative to boycott schools rather than joining them' (Tagore 1893, 1915, 1933; in Acharya 1997, 601–06)—a thought echoed a half-century later by Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* (1970). As a child, Tagore had refused to attend school; he later wrote, 'What tortured me in my school days was the fact that the school had not the completeness of the world. It was a special arrangement for giving lessons... But children are in love with life, and it is their first love. All its colour and movement attract their eager attention. And are we quite sure of our wisdom in stifling this love? We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar... Child-nature protests against such calamity with all its powers of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment.' (Tagore, in Chakravarty 1961, 218; in Prasad 2005, 81).

Tagore set up his own alternative to the prevailing educational system: Vishwa Bharati in Santiniketan, Bengal. Classes here, were—and still are—held in the lap of nature. Vishwa Bharati became a centre for excellence in art and aesthetics, creative activities and awareness of local as well as world cultures.

Gandhi's views resembled Tagore's in the emphasis on contextually relevant education, the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, and opposition to examination-oriented bookish teaching. He translated his vision into practice through a series of schools, starting in Phoenix Farm and Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, and continuing into schools set up in Champaran, Sabarmati, Wardha and many other parts of India. Gandhi developed *Nai Taleem* or Basic Education—students devoting a few hours daily to academic pursuits, and the rest of the day to the performance of 'bread labour'—craft-work, agriculture, cooking, cleaning and related tasks. His approach to education aimed at strengthening village life and communities. As early as 1917, when he began five small schools for peasants' children in Champaran, Gandhi said, 'The idea is to get hold of as many children as possible and give them an all-round education, a good knowledge of Hindi or Urdu, and through that medium, a knowledge of arithmetic, rudiments of history and geography, simple scientific principles and some industrial training. No cut-and-dried syllabus has yet been prepared because I am going on an unbeaten track. I look upon our present system with horror and distrust. Instead of developing the moral and mental faculties of the little children it dwarfs them.' Stagecraft, arts, sports and celebration of festivals from all religions were important parts of *Nai Taleem*. In *Nai Taleem*, there were no textbooks as such, but students were constantly encouraged to use the library.

Lakshmi Ashram, in Kausani, Uttarakhand, still imparts education along Gandhian lines. Set up in 1943, this residential school has educated girls from remote hill families and provided a critical consciousness that inspires them to work for social transformation. Lakshmi Ashram teachers, students and alumni have been leaders and participants in a series of people's movements, including Bhudan (1950s—for redistribution of land), Chipko (1970s—against deforestation), anti-alcoholism campaigns, and protests against destructive mining and large dams. Radha Bhatt, ex-Principal of the school, explains, 'Lakshmi Ashram does not alienate students from

their environment and homes. At the same time, they have a different awareness, and bring something new into their villages. Many choose to devote their lives to constructive activities and public service.’ (Bhatt: interview).

Educationist Gijubhai Badheka emphasised children’s need for an atmosphere nurturing independence and self-reliance. He gave this idea an institutional basis by establishing Bal Mandir in Gujarat in 1920, and, in his writings, he identified the different facets of the idea. Gijubhai’s *Divaswapna* (1990) is the fictitious story of a teacher who rejects the orthodox culture of education. This classic yields rich insights into effective teaching, as it describes experiments in education undertaken by an inspired teacher in an ordinary village school. Gijubhai showed how to teach history, geography, language and other subjects through stories and rhymes, in a way that appealed to children. He believed in arousing the child’s curiosity in a thousand and one things ranging from insects to stars, rather than routine textbook teaching. He wrote a number of books and booklets for teachers, parents and general readers, and captivating stories and verses for children.

J. Krishnamurti too thought of education in connection with the whole of life—not something isolated, leading to alienation. He looked closely at the process of learning in relation to human life. He noted that teachers have a responsibility to ensure that ‘...when the child leaves the school, he is well established in goodness, both outwardly and inwardly.’ Krishnamurti set up two schools in the 1930s—Rajghat Besant School in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh and the Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh. Over the decades, the Krishnamurti Foundation of India (KFI) has kept alive its commitment to meaningful education, expanding its network of schools to Chennai, Uttarkashi, Bangalore and Pune.

Like Gijubhai’s and Gandhi’s schools, KFI has shown that alternative education can be made accessible to those from underprivileged backgrounds as well. In 1986, the Rishi Valley Educational Foundation began setting up small rural schools (Valmiki Vanam, Rishi Vanam, Sundar Vanam, Vidya Vanam and so on). Rama and Padmanabha Rao, who guided this venture, explain, ‘These are multi-grade, one-room-one-teacher schools. We teach the child at whatever level she or he is’ (Rao and Rao: interview). Learning goals are individualised for each child, and teaching aids are carefully designed using cards, books, puppets, stories and local material.

Their 'School in a Box' concept has proved amazingly successful. Thousands of schools in several states have now adopted the carefully calibrated methods for bringing quality learning to the doorstep of rural children.

A visit to any of these schools brings to mind Krishnamurti's thought: 'Education is not just to pass examinations, take a degree and a job, get married and settle down, but also to be able to listen to the birds, to see the sky, to see the extraordinary beauty of a tree, and the shape of the hills, and to feel with them, to be really, directly in touch with them.'

Krishnamurti challenged the established system through direct, piercing questions—asking why most of us fear the 'right kind of education', and are disinclined to try it. The right kind of education would challenge conformity to present values and ways of life, and engender fundamental alterations in human relationship, away from the violence of war and starvation. 'Education in the true sense', he explains, 'is helping the individual to be mature and free, to flower greatly in love and goodness.'

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother inaugurated the idea of 'integral education' in which all dimensions of the growing child—physical, vital, mental, psychic and spiritual—are addressed. The Mother worked with children in Pondicherry, from the 1930s onwards, practising 'Free Progress'. Every child is understood to be a unique being, who should be provided the space and means to develop and flower in a spontaneous, inwardly centred and self-directed process.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother enunciated three principles of true education:

1. Nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or taskmaster; he is a helper and guide.
2. The mind has to be consulted in its own growth. The idea of hammering the child into shape is barbarous and ignorant. Education should help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use.
3. Work from the near to the far. If anything has to be brought in from outside, it must be offered, not forced on the mind. A free and natural growth is the condition of genuine development. The past is our foundation, the present our material, the future our aim and summit.

The Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education (SAICE) was established in Pondicherry in 1943. Also known simply as the Ashram School, the Mother's work here laid the foundations for practising integral education, and Free Progress. The Free Progress approach does away with tests, marks and grades. Assessment is multi-dimensional. No child fails—there is never any need. Every day, the students make a unique pledge—'It is not for our family, it is not to secure a good position, it is not to earn money that we study. We study to learn, to know, to understand the world, and for the sake of the joy it gives us.' The school has some 200 teachers—many working part-time to impart knowledge of a language, a form of music, or of a specialised subject like deep-sea diving. Students get no degrees, yet go on to do well in many different walks of life—including varied branches of academics.

Dilip Bhai, a teacher at the Ashram School, Pondicherry, explains, 'Our ends are spiritual, and we aim at developing the whole person. But even in a mundane way, such education is sensible, because in today's world what counts is not how much you know, as how far you are able to keep learning... The world is moving very fast. To cope, the child has to be able to adjust, to have the attitude and values that will help... Our education encourages an attitude of self-confidence, learning and self-study.' (Bhai: interview).

Auroville—a city set up by the Mother—has a number of schools including Transition, Mirramukhi, Last School, Arul Vazhi, Isaiambalam and New Creation. There are many other Aurobindo schools dotted across the country. One of these, that closely practises Free Progress methods, is Mirambika, in New Delhi. Within a consumerist, cut-throat competitive urban culture, here is an oasis offering children (and adults) a space to pause, reflect, reassess and reorient their aims in life.

In a spirit somewhat similar to the Aurobindo schools, a number of religious foundations such as Chinmaya Mission, Swami Vasvani Trust, Dayalbagh Educational Institute and Sathya Sai Trust as well as madarsas and Christian missions attempt to provide education that has an academic as well as spiritual and ethical dimension.

All the experiments discussed earlier focus on building small-scale, decentralised schools, with a high quality of human interaction. Many of these schools are concerned with keeping authoritative

hierarchy to a minimum. Freedom, flexibility and creativity are valued and actively promoted. Schools become a space to experiment, discover and invent new ways of learning, and being. That many of these initiatives survive to date—spanning several decades, and adapting to the times—testifies to the inherent power and energy of their underlying philosophies.

OTHER PIONEERS: LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER

Alternative education in India has been influenced by currents flowing in from other parts of the world, such as Montessori's work with orphaned and handicapped children in Italy, and Sylvia Ashton-Warner's work with Maori children in New Zealand. Montessori methods are now popular in nursery schools in many parts of India. She conceived of education as a series of responses to the child's initiatives. The child's intrinsic pattern of unfolding guides the teacher. Montessori designed very precise teaching materials, allowing each child to explore her/his inner world and capabilities, gradually unfolding at one's own pace. In this scheme, the role of education is to provide appropriate environment and stimulus for the progressive development of each child's capabilities (Montessori 1912). During World War II, Dr Montessori was forced into exile from Italy because of her anti-fascist views, and she lived and worked in India, developing her work further.

Montessori's methods continue to directly influence educational experiments in India; for instance the 'Appropriate Education Programme' run by Gramashrama and the rural programme of the Centre for Working Children, Karnataka. Drawing on the expertise of Montessori educator Amukta Mahapatra, Gramashrama's programme is integrated within ordinary government schools. It is graded for different developmental stages, the method reflecting a spirit of democracy and collectivity, and helping address the everyday situation of government schools such as multi-grade learning and the needs of special groups, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Started in 1995, by 2003 the programme was being run in 50 schools in Karnataka (Mehendale 2005).

Sylvia Ashton-Warner, whose classic book *Teacher* (1963) describes her struggles to teach reading to disadvantaged Maori children in New Zealand, has influenced language teaching by Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS), in Maharashtra. Since 1995, PSS

has adopted Ashton-Warner's method of identifying the 'key vocabulary' of young children, and teaching them through these. This has worked remarkably well with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, in Kamla Nimbkar Balbhavan—PSS's experimental school. The method has made language come alive in a meaningful and pleasurable way. They developed primers that are quite unlike the usual textbooks that children found incomprehensible, boring and difficult to relate to (Burte, in Kumar and Sarangapani 2005).

Other educationists including Rudolf Steiner, John Holt and Paulo Freire have had a discernible impact on alternative education thinking in India. Steiner's approach emphasised rhythm, fairytales and play. He said that the early years (up to age 7) of learning should focus on children's *emotions*, age 7–14 should address the *will*, and age 14–21 should concentrate on the *intellect* (Harwood 1940). John Holt questioned conventional assumptions about education in *How Children Fail* (1965) and *How Children Learn* (1967); so did *Letter to A Teacher* by the School of Barbiana (1970)—a powerful critique of the elitism inherent in schools. Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and *Pedagogy of Hope* (1996) inaugurated the method of conscientisation, which engages learners as critical thinkers, best suited to understand and analyse their own worlds—an idea that has profoundly influenced alternative educational thinking in India.

UPSURGE IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: 1970s ONWARDS

An upsurge in alternative educational thinking and practice can be discerned in India from the 1970s onwards. Widespread crises in Indian society and polity emerged by the 1960s. National development had failed to demonstrate the much-vaunted trickle-down effects—poverty was untouched, and inequalities proved obstinate. It was becoming apparent that schools were part of entrenched power structures, working to maintain the status quo, rather than as a means for social or human transformation. Several people's movements emerged in the 1970s, with a common focus on deepening democratic impulses, empowering disadvantaged sections, and redistributing the benefits of development. Alternative thinking in education also took off in a similar vein.

Over the past few decades, people have created different kinds of alternative schools, learning centres, educational programmes and interventions. The alternatives include many different strands of thinking, goals and practices. Often, there are traces or echoes of Gandhi, Tagore, Freire, Montessori, Aurobindo, the Mother, Krishnamurti and so on. Like so many pieces in a jigsaw, if we look at a number of these alternatives, we find a picture of hope emerging out of the chaotic present. This is despite the fact that mainstream schooling has declined—from bad to worse—with government schools sometimes dysfunctional, and the private sector increasingly commercialised.

One of the most significant initiatives making forays into alternative education was by the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), begun in 1972 in Madhya Pradesh by two voluntary organisations—Friends Rural Centre, Rasulia and Kishore Bharati, Bankheri. This programme, focussing on improving science teaching in schools, was developed in government schools, with the collaboration of schoolteachers, university professors and researchers, administrators and the local people. The programme involved learning science ‘by discovery’, through activities and from the environment. Field trips, experiments, observations, recording, analysis and discussion helped children become confident lifelong learners and creators—rather than passive recipients—of knowledge. The teacher’s role was modified from ‘fountainhead of knowledge’ to a facilitator and guide in the child’s quest for knowledge. Anil Sadgopal, Mira Sadgopal and Sadhana Saxena were among the group that worked together intensively to run HSTP.

In Bangalore, a school called ‘Vikasana’ was started in 1978 to cater to slum children. It was inspired by David Horsburgh’s methods in Neel Bagh—a small, experimental village school that demonstrated extraordinary results in terms of rigorous learning. David Horsburgh worked with very limited number of students, all from local rural areas. Neel Bagh provided an open atmosphere for learning. The students were encouraged and supported to pursue excellence in the subjects they learnt, with a focus on curiosity, interest, and self-motivated pursuits. Horsburgh developed a series of English textbooks, and trained a number of teachers at Neel Bagh—including some like Reena and Rohit Dhankar who subsequently started their own schools in different parts of the country. As at Neel Bagh, Vikasana creates an environment

where children can observe and learn at their own pace, in a free, flexible atmosphere. Students pay no fees in this school. Each admitted child brings a sapling, plants and nurtures it. The monthly fee is attendance—the child must come to school regularly! (Rao 1998a).

Rohit Dhankar and Reena Das—inspired, as mentioned earlier, by Horsburgh—began a small, experimental school called ‘Digantar’ in Rajasthan, in 1979. Since then, Digantar has started several more village schools, and participated in teacher training as well as curriculum design at state and national levels. Digantar ‘rejects any use of force or compulsion to ensure school participation. Equally strong is its rejection of the mechanical transfer of skills or rote learning... The aim of education, according to Digantar, is to develop a rational and environmentally sensitive understanding of the world.’ (Jain et al. 2003). Students of Digantar are drawn from ordinary village homes—lower castes or minority religions; preference is given to girls.

The Deccan Development Society, Andhra Pradesh, runs a school for peasant children called *Pachhasaale* or Green School, for dropouts and children who have never been to school (Rao 1996). Activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan have been teaching children in a number of small schools called ‘Jeevan Shalas’ (Rahul 1996). Similarly, Prakash Amte runs a school for children of cerebral malaria patients.

Jugnu Ramaswamy and Shabnam Ahmad started Jagriti School in 1990 to educate Delhi’s street children. Under the aegis of Street Survivors India, the school was like an oasis for children growing up in Motia Khan slum in central Delhi. Growing up in poverty and petty crime, exposed to the cruelty of the affluent and the police, the children could easily have been brutalised. However, the school encouraged its 500 or so children to develop their latent sensitivity and a range of untapped talents. It transformed the lives of slum, street and railway station children. But in 2002, the Delhi government, reclaiming valuable commercial space, demolished Motia Khan; along with it the school, too, became debris. Ramaswamy and Ahmad then moved to Katna village, in Murshidabad district of Bengal, where they bought land and began to build a school for the village children (Hameed 2005).

Similarly, in Pallakad district, Kerala, Gopalakrishnan and Vijaylekshmi, a teacher couple, initiated a school in 1982 for local

tribal children, called 'Sarang'. They hoped that it would grow into a rural university. Situated in deep forests, the Sarang experiment provided a unique site for learning to children who had been labelled 'backward' by the government school system. Both the founders were former government school teachers. Their son, Gautam, grew up in Sarang, an intimate part of the experiment. In the mid-1990s, the school closed down due to financial constraints. However, Gautam, now a young man, is determined to revive Sarang, which gave him a well-rounded education and a wonderful start in life.

In Uttarakhand, Anuradha Joshi and Pawan Gupta have started a number of schools under the aegis of the Society for Integrated Development of the Himalayas (SIDH). Apart from the teaching-learning activities, a unique feature of SIDH schools is the quiet time set aside for daily meditation. Coupled with a bit of counselling, this has helped the children become more confident, participatory and aware (Joshi 1996).

Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi in Uttarakhand has designed and implemented a statewide environmental education programme, which would inspire children to rejuvenate their environment rather than dream of migrating to the plains. MV Foundation, Andhra Pradesh, is bringing education to working children. Ankur, Nav-Srishti and Deepalaya in Delhi, Avehi-Abacus in Mumbai, Nirantar in Uttar Pradesh, Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) and Azim Premji Foundation (through school assessment programmes as well as computer-assisted learning) are among the scores of organisations trying to work towards better education.

Often, it is parents who start a new school, born out of the search to bring up their children in a way closer to their heart's desire. In 1993, Indira Vijaysimha took her three children out of regular school and set up a different kind of school called 'Poorna', in Bangalore. At Poorna, the attempt is to provide a holistic education, rather than the narrow range of skills imparted within the examination-oriented formal system. Academic subjects are taught in the morning; post-lunch it is time for art, craft, puppetry, clay work, lab classes and gardening (Rao 1998b).

Activists Jayashree and Amit set up 'Adharshila Shikshan Kendra' for tribal children in Madhya Pradesh. Their own children also study here. They call it a learning centre rather than a school,

in order to get away from the rigid, stereotyped and didactic type of mainstream schools. Their curriculum combines academics, world issues, practical skills and cultural heritage, with a lot of fun.

In Dharwar, Karnataka, a school called 'Bala Balaga', was started in 1996 by theatre-person Rajani Garad and her husband Prakash, a puppeteer. The school aims at teaching through theatre and the arts. Says Rajani: 'I found education was separated from life. It was purely academic spoon-feeding, lacking social responsibility, political awareness and cultural inputs... Children love the world of stories, drama and make-believe. Children grasp things immediately when events are dramatised.'

Rama and B. Ramadas have set up the Vidyodaya School in Gudalur, Tamil Nadu. It is an unusual learning centre for the children of some 30-odd tribal communities who live in the area and have their roots in the forest belts bordering Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. This couple began teaching their own two children through home schooling, only to discover that the number of students soon swelled to seven...and then more!

Vidya Patwardhan started Aksharnandan in 1989, in Pune, to put into practice her belief that a human-scale education needs schools that are small and firmly anchored in their communities. Such a school could connect the classroom with the world outside, and integrate nature and everyday life situations into all aspects of learning—which is what Aksharnandan is about.

The 'Centre for Learning' (CFL, off Bangalore) was set up in 1990 by a group of teachers, with the intention of creating an environment conducive to awakening an awareness in children—an awareness that lies beyond knowledge. Krishnamurti's teachings are an important part of their motivation. They keep the school small, believing that the key to creating the right environment is the relationship between teacher and student. The school has no competition, no examinations. Working with the hands is considered important, as also a way of life close to the trees, the earth, living creatures and the seasons. The curriculum is flexible, with a common core of certain life-skills, and opportunities for guided exploration (Jaitirtha 1998). Kabir Jaitirtha, co-founder of CFL, muses, 'Learning is not a linear process. We try to understand, but when we think, we come up with another linear process. What is learning then? Krishnamurti says that learning is possible when there is awareness, being present with one's senses. The senses are not linear. We need to pause and allow

each individual to pursue inner directions. We need to place trust in creativity. We need space for insecurity, for risk-taking' (interview).

MAINSTREAMING ALTERNATIVES?

Though it might seem fragmented and confusing, the landscape of alternative schooling is certainly fertile! From the range of schools discussed earlier, it is clear that there are people scattered across different parts of the country, dreaming of a different kind of education, and many who are actually living out their dreams. Most experiments are small, but fundamentally replicable. They reach out in meaningful ways to diverse children—from different economic backgrounds, in diverse social settings. Several experiments are clustered in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra—with a sprinkling in other places including Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bengal, Gujarat, Delhi, Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and others.

It is instructive to remember that sometimes, there is no hard and fast line dividing the mainstream from the alternative. Even hardcore 'mainstream' schools gradually adopt some elements of 'alternative' education. Lots of nursery and primary schools across the country have, for instance, adopted some elements of Montessori and play-way methods, through which children enjoy learning. Schools like Sardar Patel Vidyalaya and Heritage Foundation in Delhi try to incorporate some alternative methods within their daily work schedule. Others such as Action for Awareness, Development and Inclusion (AADI) and Amar Jyoti are pioneers in 'inclusive education'—teaching differently abled children (with mental retardation, hearing or visual problems, cerebral palsy and so on) in the same classroom as the others.

Widespread questioning has propelled even the government to usher in some improvements. Thus, non-formal education campaigns link education to social awareness—such as the Total Literacy Campaigns (in partnership with Lok Jumbish, Kerala Shashtra Sahitya Parishad, Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha and other NGOs). The Bihar Education Project (in partnership with UNICEF) has opened Charwaha Vidyalayas (for children grazing animals) and Angana Paathshalas (courtyard schools for girls in remote areas). The central government's 'Education Guarantee Scheme, and Alternative and Innovative Education scheme' employs flexible

strategies for out-of-school children, including bridge courses, back-to-school camps and residential camps for accelerated learning. In some of these, learning outcomes have proved to be of quite a high standard (*Education For All* 2005). Premier teacher-training institutions such as the District Institutes for Education and Training (DIET) have incorporated a few creative, child-centred pedagogies. The NCERT has devised a new, state-of-the-art curricular framework for school education.

Yet, all this is still a far cry from the realisation of full-blown alternatives. Sadly, mainstream education still dominates the lives of the vast majority of Indian children. Its philosophical foundations rest on large-scale, centralised, examination-oriented teaching, with inflexible daily schedules and rigid syllabi.

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire writes, 'I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream' (Freire 1996). Keeping hope alive is not easy. To even identify and explore existing 'alternatives'—however imperfect and incomplete they may be—is an exercise in hope.

We need to reach, and stay close to the mainsprings of alternative educational thinking—which nestles within visions of wider transformative socio-political changes. These alternatives will, undoubtedly, continue to develop, expand and widen. We need to shed the notion that 'There Is No Alternative' and instead, work towards bringing alive increasingly cohesive, meaningful alternatives.

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Illustration by Ayisha Abraham

Ripples that Spread: Can Innovations of Alternative Schools Spread to Mainstream Education?

Neeraja Raghavan

During the compilation of this book, Girls Education Plus encountered a number of individuals and organisations quietly working on new approaches in education. Despite the commonly-held belief that it takes more than just one person to effect a significant change in any field, our exploration took us to a number of groups who were engaged in putting in their best efforts to bring about a significant change in the field of education. It did not seem to matter to these individuals that their effort was not on a large scale, or that it was not on the national map. Content as they were to effect a change in even a few young minds, they set us thinking about the enormous possibilities that would open up if national policies were to support such changes. If the local or national government worked hand in hand with such individuals, would that not go a long way towards bringing such innovation out of the sequestered pockets and into the main forefront? While it was true of most (of the people we met) that they were not waiting for governmental policies to support their efforts to catalyse change, Girls Education Plus found that those policies that were already supportive were made good use of by many.

The governmental policy to set up a National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) was found to be the most popular. Such an avenue, which throws open the door to a relaxed and individualised pace of learning, was welcomed, we found, by most alternative schools. Indeed, this was probably the single most levelling factor in tying together alternative schools that finally aspired to set

their students on their paths to mainstream professions/education. Striking as it does at the root of what is probably the greatest impediment to joyful learning—stress-filled examinations—the NIOS has made possible the following:

- The opening of schools for slow learners.
- Inclusive education for the differently abled along with ‘normal’ children.
- Delinking of the methodology (and to some extent, even content) of a learning programme from the stringent requirements of a Board examination.
- Addressing the different pace of learning and therefore individualised assessment of each child.
- Giving a point of entry to the mainstream from an alternative paradigm.

This triggered the following questions in our minds: what, if any, are the other policy decisions that can help such efforts spread far and wide? Surely, are there ways in which these innovative efforts can find applicability on a larger scale, and not just in small pockets scattered sparsely over the length and breadth of a country as vast as India? The following is an attempt to explore such questions.

By its very definition, ‘alternative’ education seems to demand small numbers. In scaling up the whole process of education lies its doom, say the proponents of alternative education. Churn out large numbers, and you produce a factory. The death knell of meaningful learning is struck. To quote Deepti Priya Mehrotra in the main article in the present compilation: ‘Mainstream schools expect standardisation.’ With the ‘docile conformity’ that is inherent in the demands placed upon a child going to mainstream schools, ‘change’ seems to be an antonym to ‘mainstream’. And yet, one cannot help musing: In a country as large as India, does alternative education *have to be* synonymous with exclusivity?

How can some of the approaches and elements of alternative schools find their way into mainstream schools? Again, as Deepti Priya Mehrotra admits: ‘Most experiments are small, but fundamentally replicable.’

In classes of 40 to 50 children, it is clearly not possible to do *all* that one can do in a class of 20 or 30 students. But, does it have to imply that one can do *none* of those things?

If we set aside the class strength as a parameter that cannot be tampered with in most of the Indian schools, we are still left with a number of options for allowing innovation and joyful learning to diffuse into mainstream education. This article elaborates on some of the possible ways in which this can be done.

KEEP ALIVE THE LEARNER IN THE TEACHER

The teacher is usually assumed to have undergone all the necessary training in that one year of B.Ed. (or two of M.Ed.). Thereafter, the teacher is expected to dip into bottomless reserves of enthusiasm and knowledge, to teach class after class, year after year. The training given to teachers by David Horsburgh in Neelbagh is spoken of with deep gratitude, even three decades after, by his grateful trainees. A policy that demands periodic refreshment of teachers in service, through summer training and/or compulsory sabbaticals will allow the injection of some fresh inputs into the minds of teachers. Until such time as governments (state or national) demand this, schools can insert this into their own institutional policies. To aid schools to do this, in turn, governments can set up institutes that offer such refresher courses for teachers in their subjects, as well as to update them on the latest developments in all fields of learning, and, of course, in innovative teaching techniques. (This writer has had a recent experience that confirms this: a bunch of young teachers of a primary school in the South Indian town of Kanchipuram has been responding marvelously to monthly teacher-training workshops conducted by Girls Education Plus.)

EMPOWER THE TEACHER, WITH A BETTER INCOME

In India, the teaching profession is not viewed as an attractive one today because an urban teacher finds it difficult to be the family's sole breadwinner. A supportive income is what this profession offers, unless the teacher happens to live in a small town or in a rural setting. Policy makers have the power to change this. It

should become possible for a teacher to eke out a comfortable existence for himself/herself as well as the family, if the profession is to draw passionate and motivated candidates. Dissipation of energies in eking out a living will be a thing of the past if a teacher can support a family on his/her income. If teachers are viewed as earning handsome incomes, the profession will attract even those who may otherwise have opted for other lucrative jobs. Motivated teachers are hard to find, no matter what they are paid. Motivated teachers are almost impossible to find, if they are hardly paid anything significant!

MAKE A TEACHER VERSATILE

It is a facet of human nature that the curiosity and the openness which the mind brings to a 'new' subject is far above that which one brings to the subject of one's training. 'I know my subject well' is often a euphemism for 'I have lost my sense of wonder about it'. In fact, this has been this writer's own experience; while teaching science to Class VI, I put in all my energies in making biology come alive, as I had not studied it in my school years. Taking home Attenborough's CDs and books, I brought into the classroom my sense of wonder and newness at the fascinating world of Nature. In physics (also not my main field of specialisation), I took that extra care to make the subject clear and comprehensible to my class. Not surprisingly, at the end-of-term evaluation, the bunch of 11-year-olds unanimously declared chemistry to be the most 'boring' subject and biology the most 'exciting'! This has stayed in my mind as one of my most important lessons as a teacher. A policy that demands of teachers that they take time off from teaching to learn a new subject every few years, will not only increase the expertise of each teacher but will also allow them to bring in a new perspective to the subject of their training. Here again, this could become an institutional policy until such time as it becomes a governmental one. I know of an alternative school that allowed a teacher of literature to develop the expertise to teach chemistry by first letting her sit in on the classes of a senior chemistry teacher for a year or so. Slowly, this school developed what they called a hand-holding programme to facilitate the development of new expertise in each teacher who desired it. There is no reason why a mainstream school cannot adopt such a practice.

LEARN HOW TO ENQUIRE AND HOW TO RESPOND TO ENQUIRIES FROM THE STUDENTS AND OTHER TEACHERS

Documentation is boring and statutory only if it is made so. It can become an empowering tool if teachers countrywide share with their colleagues the kinds of questions that their students ask them, their attempts to answer them and the journey of each such question. If a forum for such exchanges (like a newsletter, a website or a television programme), is provided by government policy makers or even nationwide institutions, it will go a long way in enthusing teachers to meet their daily challenges better equipped. Yet another advantage of such a mechanism would be the bridging of the rural–urban divide—a sad reality even in this day of the Internet and cable television. Subject experts in the renowned institutions in the city can share their knowledge with their rural counterparts, as the latter can share theirs with the urban school staff. Radio can be made better use of by the teaching community in bringing to the attention of the lay person the challenges faced by a teacher. Phone-in shows, wherein teachers can pose questions that experts phone-in to answer, will facilitate classroom discussion without burdening the teacher with the responsibility of having to know all the answers. Live broadcasts of classroom situations (on channels devoted to enriching teachers' expertise) can be another way of learning from other innovative teachers.

USE THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

A characteristic of alternative schools and their teaching/learning methodology is their refusal to be bound by the four walls of the classroom. While all mainstream schools may not be located in surroundings that permit regular Nature walks, there is rich learning material even in the smog-filled roads of the city! One alternative school I know of uses media (in the form of TV, newspapers, advertisements) to run a dynamic course in media studies for its Middle School, while another has the students conducting an area study of a section of the city as a regular part of the social studies course, and yet another makes plentiful use of art in every day's work, regardless of the subject being taught... With just a bit of imagination, a teacher of a mainstream school can use jammed junctions and polluted roads to teach environmental studies! Of

course, in order to do this, the teacher needs loosening up of the boundaries within his/her mind, and this can be facilitated by the refresher courses for teachers outlined earlier.

PUMP FRESH AIR INTO LEARNING MATERIALS

A constant reappraisal of textbooks and learning material by the teaching as well as the learning community can be demanded of them by policy makers. Books that are mindlessly being prescribed year after year must be replaced with vibrant, interactive modules that have the classroom as their platform for coming alive. (I recall, for instance, the British tilt of textbooks that were prescribed for use in my childhood, and the bewildering names of towns like 'Edinburgh' that I struggled to read as a seven-year-old!) Today, NGOs such as the Tamil Nadu Science Forum have come out with inexpensive booklets that answer common, everyday questions which children usually raise. What is noteworthy about these booklets is the accessibility of their examples and easy identification with their contexts by the reader. If the newsletter, radio and television avenues suggested earlier are opened up, these can themselves provide the basis for the development of lively, interactive textbooks. Students' feedbacks on the textbooks that they are made to use can be made mandatory prior to revision of the prescribed material. There are, for instance, some attractive books in history that have been developed by an alternative school in South India. Eklavya's textbooks are used by many alternative schools all over the country. David Horsburgh brought out excellent material for use in rural schools in India, many decades ago. With investment of time and energy, surely more such material can be developed by teachers and students of mainstream schools as well.

NURTURE THE PARENT-TEACHER BOND

Most schools hold a perfunctory parent-teacher meet every year or less often. In many alternative schools, however, this bond is consciously nurtured. One alternative school that I know of runs periodic courses for parents on subjects of interest to them, and even ropes in the parents to take classes or give invited talks on

subjects of their expertise. In this way, the parents' resources form a pool into which the school dips, every now and then, as and when the need arises. While this may or may not be necessary (or possible) in larger schools, what can certainly be done is to allow for more frequent and less statutory interactions between teachers and parents of the students of the school. Subtly, what this does is to shift the focus from a teacher-centred education to a fusing of responsibility (for the child) between parent and teacher, and allow for an informal platform of discussion between the two. A caring policy that demands the nurturing of this crucial link would greatly assist in helping the child continue learning even outside the walls of the school.

INTRODUCE SELF-ASSESSMENT AND FRAMING OF SOME QUESTION PAPERS BY SENIOR STUDENTS

When students learn how to frame questions on a given subject or content, they become empowered in a deeper way than when they are trained to answer questions. As many a teacher will admit readily, it is far tougher to *ask* good questions than to *answer* them well. Alternative schools constantly experiment with assessment techniques so as to allow room for creativity, variety and individuality in evaluation. Self-assessment is often used as a way of seeing how well the student has grasped the expectations of the questioner in answering a question. Mainstream schools can encourage the same in their evaluation norms, by taking a fresh look, every now and then, at the methods adopted by their teachers in assessing students. Better still, if national examination policies demanded such innovations in the internal examinations of schools, this could trigger critical thinking and decrease the overwhelming fear of examinations that now cripples students.

BRING IT OUT OF YOUR CLASSROOM

During the compilation of this book, we came across many an inspiring tale of true learning. Why, we wondered, have so few of us heard such stories? One seldom hears of changes wrought by innovative and dedicated teachers. Is this because there are hardly any platforms for the expression of these? The profoundly moving

narrative of Sylvia Ashton-Warner in her book *Teacher* continues to inspire many a teacher today. Ashton Warner's key belief is in 'organic' learning, which draws out each child's own key vocabulary, instead of imposing a uniform set of words as compulsory learning for all. To illustrate, she describes in her book cases like that of Rangi, a 'backward' Maori child, who struggled for four months with words like *and*, *look* and *come*. However, the dam burst one day when his teacher asked him what he was frightened of. Out tumbled words like *police*, *butcher*, *knife*, *jail*, *hand* and *fire engine*—all of which he learnt to read in just four minutes!

How many teachers are doing such innovative things quietly within their own classrooms? Here is where a policy will help: periodic publications, newsletters, conferences and gatherings that invite the sharing of meaningful exchanges between the teacher and the taught, would go a long way in inspiring teachers who may be caught in a dry routine. The Krishnamurti schools, for instance, hold a yearly teacher's conference for the teachers of their schools. While these serve as a platform for teachers to touch base with the founder's intention and core philosophy, such a platform could serve mainstream schools equally well in bringing to everyone's notice the teaching methods that can be emulated, or the classroom strategies that can be replicated.

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,' said socio-anthropologist Margaret Mead. Without waiting for policies to change at the national level, if even a few heads of mainstream schools initiated just a few of the earlier indicated changes in their own institutions, a slow and silent revolution would begin to spread inside the walls of hundreds, thousands, millions of classrooms across the country...

Voices from Practitioners

An Alternative School is Born

Indira Vijaysimha

Which parent has not experienced dissatisfaction with the way in which their child is being schooled? How often has the question dawned in the mind of a mother or father: 'Would I be able to do a better job of educating my child?' Maire Mullarney has done a wonderful job of recording her experiences of home-schooling her own children, in the timeless classic *Anything School Can Do, You Can Do Better*. It may well seem to many that such a thing is possible only in Western countries, and not in a country like India, where Board examinations, ranks and performance seem to dictate measures of success.

While networking with various innovative educators during the making of this book, G Ed Plus came across true life-stories that were as inspiring as they were fascinating. In an attempt to bring to our readers one such experience that is closer to home, G Ed Plus invited Indira Vijaysimha to share her experience with us. Indira has been running an alternative school, Poorna Learning Centre, in Bangalore since 1993. Having taught in some mainstream institutions prior to this, she had a fair amount of experience as a teacher. However, as a mother, she felt compelled to take her children out of the mainstream school that they were in, and explore with them what meaningful education was. Her earliest discussions with them were recorded in her journal, and when we invited her to share it with us in this volume, she readily agreed. What follows is Indira's narrative, interspersed with her journal entries. We hope that this will bring alive the genesis of an institution, the understanding of enjoyable learning that children are already in possession of and the possibilities that exist if one were to put one's mind to bringing about change...all born out of the dissatisfaction of one mother...

In order to be meaningful, education should address the needs of the learner. The first question that then arises is—how can we, as teachers/educators, determine the needs of the learner? The next question is—how can these needs be met at school or at any other educational setting?

If one wishes to follow a child-centred approach to schooling, then it implies that we take seriously the stated/perceived needs/desires of children with regard to their own education. As educators we must also acknowledge that learning occurs better when the learner is involved with the learning process and has a say in deciding on both the content as well as the methodology. This is not to say that, as teachers, we do not have a role in actively shaping their learning environment. In fact, I believe that our role is critically important in determining the nature of learning that will take place, both within and outside the classroom. Ideally, the nature of teacher–student interaction would be dialogic—allowing for the co-construction of educational objectives and purposes. This process can provide for a negotiated space in which certain types of learning related to formal school subjects can take place.

These were some of the considerations that led me to hold serious discussions with my children when we decided to part ways from formal schooling and start on our learning adventure.

I resigned from my job and the children stopped going to school, and we decided to see if we could learn at home. There was a deliberate setting aside of notions related to schooling and a conscious decision to examine the kind of things that the children would like to learn in a sort of formal way.

EARLY DISCUSSIONS

As one can see from the discussions that follow, the notions of schooling and school subjects were already established in the minds of the children because of their school experience. In 1993 (when these discussions were recorded), Sumati was 10, Kartik 7 and Gayatri 5. It was interesting for me to see how the children quite clearly said that I, as their mother and teacher, should tell them more about the kind of subjects and topics that they could learn. I was also surprised at their interest in learning a number of languages. The fact that their grandparents spoke Malayalam, Tamil, Japanese, English and Hindi, perhaps had some influence

on their interest in languages. In any case, they settled for learning Hindi and Kannada apart from English. What follows is an excerpt from our early discussions:

Me: Can we talk about learning English...why is that important?

Kartik: To talk proper English.

Sumati: It is fun...you can write a book if you get ideas.

Gayatri: (To) talk properly, I want reading English.

Me: What about writing? Grammar?

Gayatri: Poems! I love.

Me: What other languages do you want to learn?

Children: Sanskrit, Japanese, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada.

Gayatri and Kartik expressed unhappiness with their Hindi and Kannada learning experiences at school; and I wanted to know why.

Kartik: Because it's difficult, writing is difficult. Teacher scolds and hits.

Gayatri: Teacher said she'll call the police because we are naughty and talk a lot.

We moved on to discussing about science; and then one of the children spoke about making musical instruments and telescopes, and then they rushed in about all the things they could/would like to make, like dresses, hats, paper houses, doll hanging (like Sussi aunty), dolls' dresses and clay pots. They said that they would like to do lots of painting and colouring. In social studies, the children said that they would like to learn about planets, astronomy and also about money and government. They spoke about learning music and playing piano and flute. I think it was Sumati who said that each person would do her/his own work and 'Mama will be doing her work and if we need help, we ask Mama.' She also said that we must plan for an outing period where we could look at butterflies, plants, birds and flowers. Gayatri piped in with '...tigers, lions, cats, dogs, wildlife.'

EARLY JOURNAL ENTRIES

So, on 2 June 1993, we *started our school!* (as I have scrawled in capital letters on the first page of the now yellowed pages of the long notebook that I maintained as a record).

4th or 5th June 1993

In about three or four days after starting, we seem to have settled into a routine that begins with yogasanas as the first ‘school activity’.

11th June 1993

We have settled more firmly into some kind of routine. The regular school-work impetus helps them get through the standard work-books. I wonder how free this school is.

13th June 1993

The children are reporting positively about their experience so far:

Sumati: It’s very nice!

Gayatri: School is so nice, I like it very much.

Kartik: I also like it!

Me: A bit too much of fighting!

Sumati: We are together all the time—we don’t fight with other children. Sometimes I like to quarrel.

Gayatri: I fight with other children too.

(Possibly referring to children in the neighbourhood, with whom they played in the evenings and weekends). When probed as to what they liked about this school at home:

Sumati: There are no periods...you can take it as long as you like, you can think about one thing for a long time.

Kartik: No punishments for not finishing work in a period. In school we have to be quiet and SILENT.

Gayatri: We can talk. Teacher used to hit me. You don’t scold us. You can do whatever you like.

When asked about what they did not like, they said:

Kartik: To have a bath!

Sumati: To read Kannada.

Gayatri: Brushing teeth.

Sumati added that she wanted to study about living things and history.

September 1993

The children and I are fairly happy about our 'school'.

Kartik: (I like)...to plan for the week,...not being forced to be silent.

Gayatri: (I like the fact that) You don't hit me,...more language to learn...to read.

Sumati: (I like) to get up and do something instead of various unnecessary activities in regular school; to say what I want to and think what I want to.

When asked about what they did not like:

Kartik: Being given orders, getting angry, Sumati to grab a particular pencil as hers, Mama shouting, to be disturbed by Amrit (toddler who lived on the floor above ours), Sumati to ask 7×9 or something.

Gayatri: To sit quiet in one place (in regular school), to share pencils, tables.

Sumati: To study in the dining room, (I'd like to go out¹), the yellow light in the dining room is not nice. Malu calling me fat.

I learned that children tend not to respond with details *unless probed specifically* by being asked to list out what they like/do not like/could do more of/could do less of and so on. It helps them when the adult is relaxed and willing to admit to her own likes, dislikes, failings and fears.

In the early days when we started, Sumati had succinctly expressed her unhappiness at being forced to sit at her desk in school for long periods of time. Other children had questioned the rationale of having to remain seated and quiet even after they had finished their work at class. When we read about A.S. Neill's Summerhill School, where classes were compulsory for teachers, but not for students, we discussed it and felt that a student at Poorna ought to be able to leave the class at the end of every period if he/she wishes to do so. Sometimes, a student may decide not to sit in on a class, and this too is accepted. We decided that if this happened more than three times in succession, then the concerned teacher and student ought to sit and talk about it and see if there is a problem that needs to be sorted out.

MORE CHILDREN JOINED

In time, the little home school grew to include more children. Sometime, approximately six months after we started home-schooling, Darshan Shankar and his family came to see us. They were relocating to Bangalore from Karjat, where Darshan had set up the NGO, Academy for Development Sciences. At Bangalore, Darshan headed an organisation called the Foundation for the Revitalization of Local Health Traditions. Darshan and his wife Flavia visited us along with their three children, Prasan aged 6, Ambika aged 4 and Nachiket aged 3. After a few hours of discussion about our ideas, philosophy and ways of working, it was decided that our home school would have six children from the next day onwards; and so it was. Darshan Shankar has been a pillar of support for Poorna ever since then. About 18 months after his children started coming to our home school, Darshan was instrumental in helping us to register as a charitable trust.

MOVING LOCATIONS

Even before this event, it was necessary for us to shift location as the lease of our rented home was over. We moved to another, slightly larger home and this proved serendipitous as we found kindred souls in our neighbours, the Desais. Vasanthi Desai joined us as a teacher and Dr Desai continues to be a member of the Poorna Trust. Two other trustees were inducted. One of them was Mahalakshmi Jayaram, my sister who is a journalist and was at that time staying with us in Bangalore. The other trustee was Yasmin Jaitirtha who is with the Centre for Learning and who continues to be someone with whom I can discuss ideas about the meaning of schooling or science teaching. When we registered as a trust, we also gave ourselves the name 'Poorna'.

At our second location, we had 12 children studying at our home. Neither Vasanthi nor I felt the need for remuneration at that time. The kitchen could be used for simple experiments that needed heating or cooling; otherwise, the world around us provided us plenty of experiences to talk about and learn from. There were flowers, trees, butterflies and birds; to delight in, name and study. The dining table was adequate for the older children to do written work and the living room had no furniture and could thus

serve as a space for *yogasanas* or dance (To this day, Gayatri feels that living rooms should have minimal furniture in order to provide space for *yogasanas* or dancing!). There was a little triangular park opposite to our home, where the children could play; and on one of our walks, we had discovered another lovely little park called Rama Vanam, hidden away at the end of the residential area. The children have spent several happy hours playing invented fantasy games in these parks. Old tyres proved splendid for all sorts of activities because they were bouncy! The garage could be used as another classroom or activity space and we even managed to mount a history exhibition and a puppet show in and around this area.

I was truly inspired by Tagore's story, *Totaar Kahini*, where the great poet seemed to say that schools are like golden cages that imprison young children instead of letting them learn naturally from their environment.

Alas, in two short years, we had to move out of this home too; this time, to another house in Sahakarnagar. There was a large ground across the street from the house. This was ample for sports activities like cricket and also accommodated boisterous spirits who could not be contained within the house! In winter, we could simply carry a few books/paper across to the ground and study in the warm sunshine. By this time, there were 17 children in the home school and it was truly time to find another location, which would not have to double as home after school hours.

The next part of the story is a bit like a fairy tale. I was feeling anxious and tense about finding a suitable place for the school and wondering how the expenses for the rent could be managed. One evening, a friend came to visit and on her way back, she pointed to a walled-off compound and spoke about how that space was once meant to house a science centre for children—a project that for some reason did not take off.

'See if it is still available—Indira!', she said, as she got into the autorickshaw.

Well, there was no one to open the gate or answer queries and so I left a note stuck on the sheet metal gate and went back home. When I returned the next day, an old caretaker met me and told me when I could speak to the owner of the property. One thing led to another and we managed to rent out three rooms in the property. These were originally meant for classrooms, but had last been

used to house poultry! Mahalakshmi, the children and I really had a lot of cleaning to do that summer to get the place ready for school! When school started in this location, there were still sheep and fowl in some of the rooms, but there was also plenty of space—wild, overgrown and exciting!

SOME EXPERIMENTS

One notable discussion that we had with children led to the whole school adopting our version of the school system described in the book, *Toto-chan*. One key idea from *Toto-chan* was that of the teacher putting up the day's work for each child and then the children having the freedom to choose to work through the list in whatever order they felt like. This is what we tried to do. We took the responsibility, as teachers, of planning out, subject-wise, what each student would do on a particular day. We worked out when and how the student would come to the teacher for feedback or guidance, and then left the children to get on with the tasks as they saw the best.

It was interesting to see how some of the academically able students breezed through their studies with verve and then had hours of free time to play, paint or read stories. Groups of children also planned to complete their work together in order to play team games together. Quite a few children, however, did not estimate with any degree of accuracy, the time they would need to complete their study tasks. They would come in towards the end of the day and find that there was not enough time to complete the work and then have to carry it forward. Eventually, it became evident that these children were not making enough progress in their work and would need more direction from the teacher. Some children also seemed to miss the give-and-take of an interactive classroom, where the lesson was discussed and ideas exchanged. Several children felt a little lonely or bored doing their work by themselves and spontaneously started working in informal class-like groups. This experiment was continued for about three months and was then discontinued after another discussion, where teachers and some students shared their reasons for wanting a change.

Thus, over the years, our school experimented with approaches and evolved its methods and curriculum.

SOME IMPORTANT LEARNINGS

Unfortunately, as I got busier with more children and more ideas, my journal-keeping became increasingly sketchy and eventually stopped altogether. But the habit of including children in decisions about their curriculum and timetable has become entrenched at Poorna. Among other things, discussions are held periodically to understand the need for school rules and these rules are often reviewed. There have been plenty of discussions on the use of play spaces and conflicts arising out of this. When children come from schools/homes that seem not to pay attention to their felt/stated needs, they tend not to trust the discussion process at first. Sometimes, they do not quite trust the teachers to take their responses seriously and at other times, they respond with frivolousness or cynicism.

Yet, in retrospect, I maintain that the time and energy spent in including children seriously in the process of thinking about and planning their schooling is well worth the effort and we should find ways of doing it still more effectively and meaningfully.

SOME STUDENTS OF POORNA

Sumati, the first one to write the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) examination from Poorna, is now completing her M.Sc. in wildlife and conservation biology. Kartik is completing his final year of his degree in biotechnology.

This is what another student, my daughter Gayatri writes:

School and freedom are synonymous words to me. In school I can be myself and that's what I value the most. I have always felt a part of school and therefore in some ways responsible. I continue to discuss and argue with my mother about the changes that take place and what needs to be done. School gave me the freedom to question authority, play with issues like gender and need for structure. I felt responsible at school, as we were a part of planning the rules, the timetable.

Most of the students who have completed the tenth standard examination from Poorna are pursuing higher studies in diverse fields ranging from hotel management to Ayurveda. A few students with severe dyslexia are struggling with academics. It is one

of our future plans to put into place a meaningful school experience for such children: a schooling that will enable these bright young people to find a satisfying career, vocation or profession, without feeling frustrated and defeated because of their difficulty with written texts.

Today, students are prepared for the NIOS examination; but of course, our emphasis is not merely that. The choice in pace of taking this examination allows us the room for exploration of the subject, which we teach according to what we perceive as necessary, without restricting ourselves to the demands of the NIOS syllabus.

Today, too, Poorna Learning Centre is a happy place. What began as a home-learning adventure has grown organically, over the years, into an institution. An open campus with a few classrooms belies the necessity of heavy infrastructure like gymnasium, swimming pool, computer centre and so on. Doubtless, learning is happening here, and enjoyably too...evidently, the ingredients for this outcome are not the tangibles that contemporary society consistently emphasises! As an effort that was initiated by dissatisfied parents, Poorna is an eye opener on what is truly essential for making a difference in the field of education: no huge buildings, no swimming pools to boast of. Just a bare and open yard with a few barrack-like rooms instead. And, as a student who showed visitors around pointed out, 'Those are banana trees, and we have drumstick. Oh, and here's cinnamon'. Surely, such children will value completely different things from the teenagers of today. More importantly, Poorna is evidence of the possibility of bringing about a change in the education system, and of doing it *with* the children.

NOTE

¹ In the school as it is today, the freedom to go out of the classroom (at the end of every period) was appreciated by a nine-year-old student of this school whom we interviewed (See interview with a student of this school in the chapter 'Student Who Studies in an Alternative School').

Living without Comparison, Learning without Competing...

G. Gautama

One of the basic tenets of J. Krishnamurti's teachings is that nothing can be gained by comparison. This is the reason why K schools, the world over, do not encourage competition or competitiveness. However, this is a matter for debate: most mainstream school-goers face competition as a 'necessary' tool to equip them to face life thereafter.

We invited G. Gautama to share his views on why and whether competition was necessary as a motivation to allow learning, and this is his response...

Some months ago, one evening gazing at the sky, my young son asked me a question. 'Whenever I move, why does the moon follow me? The stars also follow others. I have asked others also. They follow everybody.'

I asked him if the trees also followed him.

He was clear that near objects did not follow him when he moved. They moved in the opposite direction. It was only objects that were far away that moved in the same direction.

Almost all over the world, competition is considered necessary and appropriate for doing well, for excelling. When we have another person to keep pace with us, it provides a reference point. Why is this reference—comparison—important? What are the purposes it serves? What are the dangers and problems that we accept when we accept competition?

At the outset, comparison and education would appear to have little in common. However, the entire schooling system depends on comparison. Assessments that teachers make of children are comparative. Parents, students and teachers are acutely aware of the 'position in class'.

This is considered so important that applicants to universities abroad have to provide this information in addition to marks obtained in exams. The fact that one is more gifted than another in a certain avocation, at a certain time, is not difficult to accept and acknowledge. It is also logically clear that being better in a subject or a skill does not make a better human being.

Most thinking people would surely agree that comparison is destructive and certainly should have no place in education. Some others would say that, while unwholesome, it cannot be entirely avoided. How else would you know how the child fares in a class? Yet, others may strongly advocate comparison as the source from where one betters oneself, as in competing with another.

Let us leave these perspectives alone for the moment. They have been argued ad nauseum. Let us carefully look at one facet of comparison, the notion of betterment, which is the backbone of education—and our life—and see where we are located.

The notion of betterment appears to be buried very deep in human consciousness. To see how deep, one merely needs to watch one's response to somebody who says: 'I do not want to be better'. We feel like ridiculing this unfortunate person, we feel angry or even experience pity. We may even feel strongly that this must be corrected. There is little doubt that we all believe in improvement of the self. This is a fact of life for most of us.

Is there any connection between this fact and the way we all grew up? When a child is born and grows up laughing and playing, everyone is delighted. Each child has its own idiosyncrasies, but each child is also beautiful. However, this lasts only for a short period. Soon, one begins to watch other children like one watches the neighbour's houses or fields or properties. And of course, all children must go to school to study and be educated. This is the way of the world! We are afraid if someone suggests that children can be sent to school late or that they need not go to school. Those who have not been to school are considered either illiterate or backward. Therefore, we have to send our children to school—just like everyone else. This is a critical juncture. The child and the parent have entered *the arena of common beliefs and accepted notions*.

From this time on, in every conceivable way, the child will be told that what he cannot do is more important than what he can do. *The child will learn that what he does not know is always more important than what he knows*. Being able to recognise the alphabet is the first

step of this invisible ladder. Being able to read words is the second. And soon, one is climbing an infinite ladder, much like the beanstalk that Jack started climbing. Once this process begins, one has to keep moving. There is an ocean of knowledge. One has, in all humility, to acknowledge this fact by saying that one has to learn more. It is pertinent to ask 'How did we and our parents forget that every child learnt to talk and walk without these being considered as steps on a ladder?' or without comparing, competing with another?

We read, write, express and do some maths. Some have greater facility with the language and others have less. Certain kinds of proficiencies develop with practice. If I understand that I practise to become more proficient, it is one thing. However, if I need another person in order to better myself, it is another matter. Does the fact that someone has better handwriting automatically become the obvious factor for my improvement? If Bob Beamon was merely trying to improve what the previous long jumpers had done, he would have made a small improvement. However, his record-breaking long jump in 1972 in Mexico was a very big distance ahead of others. It is rarely considered if, by comparing and competing, we actually *limit* ourselves.

Measuring a student's performance is considered natural and needed. But one may ask, for whom is this measurement needed; for the student, the school or the exam board? The student needs to understand the mistakes he or she has made when attempting a piece of work. The student needs to be advised as to how he or she can study and understand the subject. What is the connection between class position 23 out of 30 and the above? Apart from showing the student his place (a very brutal superior exercise), what purpose does it serve? Does it inspire? Iqbal says:

Chand taron ke aage nishaan aur bhi hain
 Ki tere makaan aur bhi hain.
 Rojo shab me ulajh ke na rah ja
 Tere imtehaan aur bhi hain
 Shaheen hai tu,
 Parvaaz hai kaam tera
 Chand taron ke aage nishaan aur bhi hain...

Many are worlds beyond the moon, beyond the stars!
 Many destinations wait for you!

Stay not enmeshed in daily everyday travails,
 Many are the challenges that wait for you!
 Fledgling eagle art thou!
 Soaring in the skies is your birthright!
 Many are the directions beyond the moon, beyond the stars!

If our mission in education is to set free the fledgling eagles, do we dare stay away from puerile measurement?

There appear to be two whole facets of human existence—the measurable and therefore improvable, and the immeasurable and thus unimprovable. In life and relationships—beyond the work we do and the money we earn—there are other things, such as feelings and psychological realities. For instance, I know that I am selfish and I understand logically that I must be less selfish or not at all selfish. I attempt to make the same kind of effort to achieve this end. I try to measure and achieve. How does one measure selfishness, anger, hatred, jealousy, sorrow? The problem is that these cannot be measured, but need to be understood differently.

Accepting the notion of improvement means accepting comparison. It also means that desire is justified. My neighbour has a bigger car, better handwriting and better manners. To want to be like him is of course right and humble. Whatever one is or one can do is not good enough. This means, one is deeply trained to see oneself as moving or improving however unfactual this is. This notion is passed on from generation to generation most effectively. And improvement cannot exist without comparison.

One may proceed to ask what purpose the notion of self-improvement serves, if any. If one has to constantly live with the feeling that one must improve, it surely must be a pretty empty and painful life—like in the myth of Sisyphus, one would be toiling only to find oneself back at the foot of the mountain after each step.

We have all learnt to live with the notion of improvement unquestioningly. Can we face the fact that in this area there may be no such thing as improvement? After all, selfishness cannot be measured, or anger improved. Any denial of the actual is a violent act. Is there any way of living with the actuality of the things that we want to improve—anger, jealousy, timidity, smallness, hatred—which is different?

Is there a way I have of understanding anger or hatred *without a reference point*, without comparing it with something else? Do we know what it means to observe or understand something

without reference to anything else? It can also be asked if we can communicate without any comparison whatsoever. We seem to be constantly thrown back into the realms of comparison. One whole area of human existence remains inadequately understood and poorly lived with.

In our search for the right kind of education, is it not therefore vital to pay attention to this aspect of human living? To tread on the grounds of the measurable and the comparable may be necessary for living in the world of transactions. But it can never be complete and whole without the capacity to let go of all measurements and comparisons. Is this part of the mandate of education and educators? How is this to be done? Holding fast to the bastions of the measurable is not going to take us further, certainly.

One may be asked or one may wonder: how will students who have not been compared with each other ever fit into the competitive world of today? If schools do not teach students to face competition, would not they turn out to be social misfits?

Even if the school does not believe in comparing students in terms of marks, ranks and class position, children encounter comparison in their daily lives. Students compare each other, and the world outside school does not spare anyone. Height, colour, accent, smartness, goodness and marks are all grist for the comparison mill.

The question really is whether a young person can learn that comparison is limited. Can a non-comparative space, in interactions with teachers, and possibly at home, leave a taste of another way of relating? Should the role of schools be to help students 'fit' into society? Or should it be to grow discriminating, sensitive people?

Discriminating, sharp observation often does not help one fit in. On the other hand, it makes one stand out—for not cheating when others are cheating, not bribing when it is commonly done, standing in queue when others are jumping the line, speaking the truth when a lie would pass... In fact, the world is the way it is, because too many people are fitting into an unthinking, mindless culture. Part of this culture is the notion of limited opportunities, competition and the notion of winning and losing. The school and the teacher were never meant to validate and accept all that society is. They have no choice about examining and questioning what happens, and all that happens. This is the only way by which a thinking, reflective and discerning mind can be produced from our schools.

Examinations: An Empowering Tool or a Fatal Blow to Self-confidence?

Asha Sudarshan

In an attempt to examine the 'versus' clause between alternative and mainstream education, we took a look at the most obvious distinctions. We asked the question: when does it become 'either/or'?

And we came up with the stumbling block of examinations. Sadly, most tend to regard examinations as being almost synonymous with schools and education! Who has not sympathised with the tension-wrought, over-stressed student preparing for those fearsome examinations? In their attempt to assess the student's knowledge and skills, why do they often leave the student with a shattered sense of self-esteem and an overpowering fear of the future?

Examinations, we discovered, were a big factor in determining the category into which a school would fall, depending upon its emphasis on students' performance in them. While this is of course not meant to imply that simply by virtue of disregarding the importance of examinations, a school can be considered 'alternative', there is no denying the fact that a polarisation seems to have developed. While alternative schools are regarded by their critics as failing to equip their students to face examinations, mainstream schools are often regarded as doing little else! Does it have to be this way? Does alternative education necessarily imply a shifting of emphasis from examinations and performance, and in some cases, a complete disregard for scoring well in examinations? Does the baby have to be thrown out with the bath water?

We were keen on getting responses to questions such as those that follow:

- Is it possible to accord examinations and examination skills their place, while retaining the joy of learning and allowing the teacher full room for innovation?
- How does one allow flexibility in the assessment system, without allowing standards to drop?
- Is it possible to assess a group of children without expecting all of them to adhere to the same baseline? Do all children have to fit into one common mould when it comes to examinations?

Answers to such questions, we felt, would carry the ring of authenticity when they came from a practitioner, and not a mere theoretician. And so we met Ms Asha Sudarshan, Principal of Silverqueen Public School, Bangalore, who shared with us her views on this subject and her exploration of a flexible baseline for a class of children.

You have taught in mainstream schools for several years before starting your own alternative school. Tell us a bit about your experience with examinations in the schools where you worked. Were they empowering or terrifying?

In my 18 years of experience in mainstream schools, I have found exams to be an empowering tool for the students who come from a healthy background where they are given all the encouragement, attention and opportunities from home. However, in contrast, I have also found exams to be taxing, scary and a highly strenuous exercise on the child.

When the whole process becomes tension-filled, it becomes a ridiculous method of evaluating the child. A lot of anxiety is caused, resulting in loss of memory during exams, leading to frustration and depression. Tremors, fear of not being able to perform, and guilt of disappointing parents can be the causes for severe trauma in some children.

This, followed by unwanted comparisons between siblings themselves, and the peer, and being branded as dull-heads, can push an already defeated child (whose self-esteem is low) to the

ultimate bottom rung of the ladder. In their search for an easy solace, they are liable to fall prey to alternatives like alcohol or drugs, and eventually, suicide.

On the other hand, the constant goading by parents to score very high marks in order to secure a seat in professional colleges and their pressure to attend tuitions are stressful and quite unnecessary for most children. This snatches away playtime and adds to their misery. Ultimately, the whole process seems so futile! Children get so caught up in this rat race that their lovely childhood is lost.

How then should examinations be approached? What are your ideas and have you had success implementing any of them?

The word 'exam' needs to be altered in the mindset of the child. Instead of *examining* the child, *assess* him or her on a wider scale. This could be more creative, fun and challenging, without damaging the tender minds. This would be more encouraging and would motivate children to perform better. The word 'exam' puts in an immense fear in parents who easily transfer this fear to the child.

Assessments should be interesting, light, activity based and should cover all areas of a child's growth. This is possible on a day-to-day basis, with a smaller strength in each class. This would give a lot of scope for *learning through doing* and reinforcement of what has been learnt. The test of this can be done through objective-type questions.

Children are usually averse to writing, but do not mind oral assessments. The poor performance of children who are able to deliver orally, but cannot put things down in writing, made me do some introspection.

I tried to explore new avenues in the examination system.

As a motivating tool, merit cards were given out to those who scored the highest in each subject. This system, we found, worked wonders! We found the non-performers achieving and striving hard to get many merit cards; and this enhanced their ability which, in turn, worked wonders with their self-confidence. While we had announced merit cards only for those who scored the highest in each subject, we soon found that all the children qualified for these cards...because all of them scored the highest! In addition, consistent study habits were formed.

How can we slow down our pace of assessment without compromising on the quality of education?

The need for children to develop the ability to write long answers can be done in phases: from Class I to Class V or VI. Even here, a certain amount of marks can be specially allotted to children who answer questions in grammatically correct sentences of their own. This, I found, helped in giving scope for improvement of language and also gave food for thought.

The following is the pattern I have set for evaluating the assessments:

<i>Class</i>	<i>Oral</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>Dictation</i>	<i>No. of dictation words</i>
Ist	60	30	10	10
IIInd	50	40	10	20
IIIrd	40	50	10	30
IVth	30	60	10	40

From fifth or sixth and above, children can slowly shift to the regular mainstream pattern where they need to learn how to compete and cope with the regular pattern of examinations. This will not be difficult, since they are already prepared right from the lowest class. In high school, regular worksheets will help children get used to writing and help them gain speed. In their final year, regular tests and preparatory exams will help shed the examination fear, so that the board exams become a child's play for them with absolutely no fear. Thus, examinations at this stage can become an empowering tool to instill confidence in them.

How do you ensure that the so-called weaker children do not get overpowered by the examination, and yet get assessed? Have you experimented with testing parameters to suit the levels of different children?

I always tell my teachers, that 40 children have to be treated in 40 different ways. Why, you cannot teach even two children in the same way!

Some children who have the grasping ability and reproduce the answer orally kept getting defeated when it came to answering a written paper. Hence, to encourage them—to give them confidence

and build their self-esteem—I introduced an oral paper as well, which could prepare them for viva voce and interviews in their later years. This idea occurred to me when I came across brilliant children not able to score—because they never completed their paper on time, despite knowing all the answers. This could also be highly frustrating for the child. Here, objective type and orals could help.

When a child fell sick and missed a month's lessons, I did not expect that child to answer the same question paper as the rest of the class. I gave a set of questions to the parents and asked them to coach their child in these. My assessment thus factored in the child's situation without compromising on our need to assess the child.

Spelling being another area where many children could suffer, I decided that dictation would be an area where children can be assessed. When I was in Oman, teaching in the Indian school there, I found that the children there were very good in spelling. Spelling skills were emphasised there, and I found that this was not the case in most mainstream Indian schools where I worked. So, when I started my own school, I decided to introduce dictation in every subject: even in math, for instance, children would be drilled in spelling 'addition', 'subtraction' and so on. Handwriting and neatness are very important areas, too. If we help children develop neat and legible handwriting, in the long run, this would definitely help the child score well. Reading tests of known and unknown passages develop reading skills.

Recitation is also conducted and evaluated. This not only tests the memory, but modulation of voice, stage fear and acting ability, too.

Having tried out various methods of evaluating the child, I have found that it has worked out better in developing children, specially those whose confidence levels and self-esteem were low.

Is there any special way in which spelling is taught in your school?

We teach spelling through phonetics; for example, the word 'satisfactory' would be split up into the following:

s-a-t: sat
i-s: is
f-a-c-t: fact
o-r-y: ory

With special words like ‘although’, we first teach the five sounds of the letter ‘a’, and then teach that the sound of this letter in this word is the ‘au’ sound as in ‘all’. Next, we teach the ‘th’ sound as being hard like in ‘the’, and finally bring to the attention of the child that this is an exception in that the letter ‘g’ is silent.

Can you tell us about some real-life cases where your explorations with assessment methods helped empower the so-called weak children?

Yes, here are some practical examples with whom these methods have worked:

- Miss Shardha is from an affluent family. She is spastic and dyslexic. Her mother over-protected her, which hampered her development. Today, she has shed all her inhibitions and is shaping up beautifully. Her public speaking and singing abilities are being developed beautifully. She has absolutely no inferiority complex. She is good at speaking, oral assessment and scores in dictation.
- Master Pavan of the second standard was branded as a ‘defective’ child by his previous school. He has started blossoming with this evaluation system. His confidence levels have shot up and his performance is on par with other children.
- Miss Divya of the first standard is a mason’s child with absolutely no help at home. She is a keen learner. She has been given a lot of motivation and opportunities at school. Her ability to answer orally is helping her perform better at the moment. This has also built her confidence and self-esteem. She has begun showing interest in studies and other activities.
- Master Joseph of the second standard is an Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) child with speech delay and delayed milestones. He has good memory power, good hand-writing and good articulation now. He has shaped up beautifully, and his performance is on par with others.
- Master Ronnie of the second standard has had a speech delay and was slightly slow in understanding. He has picked up and shown improvement and has started conversing with friends.

- Miss Chandini, who is in the fourth standard, is an ADHD child with mild cerebral palsy, delayed milestones, precocious puberty at the age of seven, enlarged pituitary, behaviour problems, has a problem balancing herself and slurred speech...this child has shown good grasping ability, but is dyslexic. She has shown good progress because of our evaluation system and this has made her quite outgoing.

Can you tell us a bit more about how you ensure that there is no compromise on the quality of education, even as you tailor-make the assessments to suit each child's unique situation?

In order to ensure that there is no compromise on quality of education, I make sure that the core ideas are put across and reinforced in the child. We ensure that core ideas are grasped by the child, by asking the same question in several twisted ways.

To ensure that the day-to-day reading happens, weekly worksheets were introduced in my school, which covered only the week's portions. Thus, the reading habit, along with understanding what was read, helped each child gain knowledge, and his/her ability to answer questions became better.

In most schools, the question paper is handed out and the children are expected to answer the paper. However, in my school, I request the teachers to go around and see if the children are writing the answers, if they are able to understand the questions and even if they are answering them rightly. If a teacher finds, for instance, that a child is making an error in the answer sheet, s/he will caution the child: 'Think it over.' You see, we do not want the child to make silly mistakes and we want to lend our support to the child even during the examination. We want to ensure that the child thinks during the examination and does not mechanically answer the paper without thinking. Sometimes, a child may not want to think. S/he may just be impatient to go out and play. In our school, we make sure that even the lazy or impatient child reads through his/her answer and only then goes out. Our teachers act as facilitators even during the examination. One of my teachers objected to this system, saying that no school ever does this. But I explained to her why we were doing it. No, it is not spoon-feeding, because these are little children to whom we are imparting exam skills *during* the examination.

If a child is unable to concentrate, s/he is probably facing some problem at home or in class. It once happened in one mainstream school that I taught, that a child scored a hundred on hundred in math, but would throw all other papers out of the window! He would orally tell the teacher the spelling, but would leave a dash on the answer script. Upon talking to the child, we discovered that his father had run away with another lady, and that this boy had actually been very close to his father. His mother sold milk to educate her son. I talked to the boy, and he came to my place and improved enough finally to get a first class in his Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) exam.

Here was one way of approaching those fearsome events: examinations. Asha Sudarshan runs an alternative school which is featured in this compilation. With the inclusion of specially abled children being a key feature of her school, the 'explorations into flexible baselines and facilitating of examinations' is something that is ongoing here. This is one living example of a school which realises the importance of learning and how to take examinations, even while focussing on learning through exploration and fun.

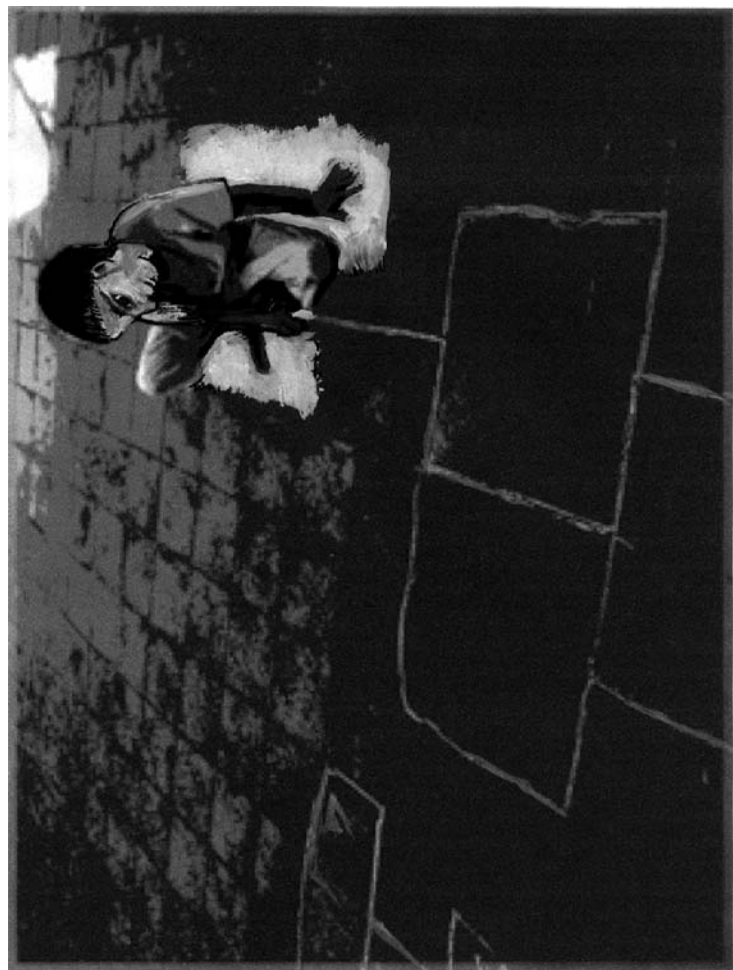


Illustration by Ayisha Abraham

Interviews

Parent of a Child Who has Gone from a Mainstream to an Alternative School

Sheela Gowda

Ms Sheela Gowda is the mother of a nine-year-old boy, who goes to an alternative school in Bangalore. She took him out of a mainstream school and put him in an alternative school.

What were the features of mainstream schooling that you were unhappy with?

Dhruva went to a Montessori preschool which I would not consider as mainstream. There was a singular lack of outdoor activity, like free play in this particular school. On being questioned about it, the Principal said that the Montessori method gave adequate exercise for the child within the classroom, which I did not agree with. I also became critical of the purist nature of the Montessori method, as it was taught there, and felt that it could do with some creative adaptation from the cultural environment of the region, without changing the basic principles behind it. Even with those principles, they did not quite adhere to them...like their teaching my son cursive writing (writing in general) too soon, because they were pressurised by other parents to prepare their students for possible admissions to varied mainstream schools, which had 'higher standards' for these kids. He had to unlearn this when I put him in an alternative school, where they believe in quite the contrary! I, however, appreciate their contribution in reading, math, and the teaching of the regional language, which was innovative, successful, and painless in the methodology.

What were/are you looking for in the education of your child?

I find that difficult to spell out; I guess that it is easier to say what I *do not* want to see happening to my child. I want him to grow up emotionally strong and have the courage to make decisions in his life which may not tread the beaten path; and hope that he will respect and value life and our environment. Well, I did ask myself, when I had to choose a school for my son; and what was so wrong with me, having had a mainstream school education. If I could lead my life well enough today after a mainstream school education, why would I want something different for my son? Also, with alternative schools, there is not such a long history to fall back on...we do not have many generations to observe, and to test, if alternative schools make a real difference. But beyond a point, I realised that one must trust the educator: even if what they are saying sounds too radical at times. I remember the kind of science laboratories that we used and the experiments that we were made to perform: each with a predetermined result! I do not remember much of these experiments; but then, we do not always remember all that has impacted us in our lives. I do strongly believe that whatever we learn comes of use, some time or the other, in ways we cannot foresee. So, when my son goes to a school which does not have a lab of the kind I had used, for example, I do not know whether he is missing out on what I had learnt in the way I learnt it. But then, he is learning Science in his school now, in ways which I never did: in a holistic manner.

Does alternative education address your child's needs/your aspirations for the nurturing of your child?

Here, Dhruva gets adequate space/time for playing and learning without too much pressure to compete and perform. The teacher is able to observe each child and address their special needs and inclinations. The free play that he enjoyed for two years, to his heart's content, has taught him skills and an understanding of his body, its physical abilities and limitations.

Do you perceive any gaps between the alternative school's professed goals and the employed educational methods?

The alternative school my son goes to does not make too many definitive claims; so I cannot complain of a mismatch between their

promises and what they do. They do have well thought-out methodologies and reasons for what and how they teach. All children and their abilities are not the same. The success of their methodology has to be tempered with the ability of the child. The home and the impact of the parents have a role to play as well in a child's development. Teachers in the school Dhruva goes to are very dedicated. With this kind of dedication and thought, one cannot go *too* wrong in helping a child to develop a healthy personality.

8

Teacher Who Works in an Alternative School

Diba Siddiqi

Diba Siddiqi has been exploring alternate lifestyles, ways of learning to live in harmony with the environment and engaging with children in mutual explorations of holistic living. She currently teaches in an alternative school in South India.

Why did you choose to teach in an alternative school?

I did not set out looking for an alternative school. I had worked with an NGO for five years, and when I felt it was time to move on and step out of my old role, I came to this city and looked for a suitable group to work with. I had heard about this school and when I met the staff, I found that I took to the people. I first visited them in 1996 for a few weeks and then stayed on to teach here. What appealed to me was no single thing: it was a whole range of issues, basically their engaging with questions of Life. I would say that I was most drawn by the whole process of enquiry and engaging with questions.

What are the most enjoyable aspects of being a teacher in an alternative school?

I would say that learning is the most enjoyable aspect. Relationship with people as well as children is another.

What are the least enjoyable aspects of being a teacher in an alternative school?

None, really. There is nothing that I would say I resent or try to avoid. Perhaps, all I would mention is that because there is so

much decentralisation, there is sometimes a lack of clear leadership. This naturally has its own impact. But we do tend to have clear roles and responsibilities in small areas. While we try not to be hierarchical, there is, somewhere, a hierarchy. But the good thing is that people are aware of this and keep trying to work around this.

Do you experience too high demands/expectations from the parents/child/school management?

No, I don't at all. In fact, I tend to put demands on myself! I always feel I should do more: but there have never been any stated demands in my situation. I work quite closely with at least one other person, and I have co-taught classes. In such an ambience, though, I find that self-assessment is very important, as also knowing what is happening in other classes. We often tend to be unaware of what other teachers are doing in their classes.

Do you experience too much or too little of the following: Emphasis on syllabus and examinations, structures, concern for your own development, motivation from children to learn better, ambition from parents for their children, attention from the management to your career path?

No, I do not experience too much (or too little) emphasis on syllabus, examinations, or motivation from children to learn better. On structures, too, while I do not experience too much emphasis, I sometimes do feel the pressure from a timetable; which, however, I realise is inevitable. You cannot just let the whole school loose! In all fairness, I must say that I do get my own time.

Parents who are very ambitious for their children tend to get weeded out at the time of admission, and so we do not face too much of that. As for attention from the management, we have no management! We are the management! Far from experiencing too little emphasis on my own development, I always feel that I am learning so much here. Right now, for instance, I am part of a group that is learning about the trees on campus. Just being with children, engaging with them and making something come alive (with them) are all so rewarding. I even did a photography course here.

What makes alternative schooling, in your opinion, special and different?

The possibility of allowing children to learn without fear, to really explore whatever it is that draws them without feeling slotted, judged or measured (I stress the use of the word 'possibility' here, as I avoid making blanket statements!). For this to happen, I would say that exposure is not as critical (at least until Class VI or so), as is the atmosphere in which this exposure takes place. There is joy and exploration in the right kind of atmosphere, but we must remember that I am talking of the ideal here.

What kind of school did you go to and what is your overall impression of your own schooling? Was it a mainstream school?

I went to a 125-year-old (at that time) school, in a big city, which was typically British with houses, and competition...the works! I went through it all without any complaints or questions, although I did find that the major focus was on academics, with a pretty demanding academic schedule!

How do you think some of the approaches and methods of alternative education can be incorporated into mainstream schools?

Well, the most limiting factor is all the course work. Teachers in mainstream schools may have a set syllabus to follow and, therefore, may not have the space to adopt an exploratory approach. But before the kids reach Class VII or VIII, I definitely feel that it is possible. For instance, I teach Social Science, and I do not follow any prescribed textbook; we develop our own material and it is a great deal of work. If teachers in mainstream schools are willing to put in that kind of work, yes, it is possible even in a mainstream school—at least until Class VIII.

Student Who Studies in an Alternative School

Dhruva

Nine-year-old Dhruva goes to an alternative school in Bangalore. He used to go to a mainstream school.

Do you enjoy going to school? Why (not)?

Yes, I like going to school. In my old school, we could go out only at the end of the day, when it was usually too hot to enjoy being outdoors. But here, in my new school, we are allowed to go out of the classroom after every class is over. I like playing; I like all my teachers and all the subjects.

What are the most enjoyable aspects of being a student in an alternative school?

This school allows me to go out of the classroom when a class is over. I can look around the field and then return to my classroom. I once spotted an aeroplane when I was outdoors: I was the first to tell my classmates about it!

What are the least enjoyable aspects of being a student in an alternative school?

There is nothing that I don't like about my school. I like everything about it!

What would you like to be when you grow up?

I want to be a spy, because I love codes. I like hieroglyphics.

Cinematographer Who Went to an Alternative School

Navroze Contractor

Navroze is a well-known cinematographer and photographer, who has photographed several documentary films. He is the author of *The Dreams of the Dragon's Children*, published by Penguin. His name is attached to award winning films like *Something like a War*, *The Legacy of Malthus* by Deepa Dhanraj. At present, Navroze is involved in making several documentaries with Deepa Dhanraj. Besides teaching at prominent universities/colleges, he also conducts workshops in primary schools across India. He went to two alternative schools, Balghar and then Shreyas, in Ahmedabad between 1947 and 1963. He has wonderful memories of his school years. We asked him to talk to us about those years, and this is what he shared with us...

Tell us how your school was started...how did you get to go there?

A phenomenal lady, Leena Sarabhai, started my school. Today, she is aged over 90 and is still mentally alert: you *must* meet her. The story goes (even if it is a legend, it is one I love) that way back in 1947, she invited Madam Montessori to help her start a school in Ahmedabad. Both of them decided to start a purely Montessori school...but who would send their children to this school?! So Leenaben knocked on the doors of her neighbours and friends, and asked them to send their children to her school. My parents, who were her neighbours, obliged by sending one of their sons (myself) to her school. They sent their older son (my brother) to a mainstream boarding school for boys in the hills.

Actually, my brother is five years older than me and he was already in school.

I was three when I was admitted to Shreyas, but the children were of such varying ages that it was decided to start a school for very little kids, and that is how Balghar—a kindergarten school—was started by Leenaben's sister-in-law (her brother's wife), Kamlini Khatau, a trained psychologist; so all of us who were eligible were shifted there. This lady took 25 children of mixed ages into her kindergarten. She was wholly responsible for every one of those children: she would pick us up, bathe us, feed us, teach us, play games, take us for picnics, swimming and drop us back every day. How we loved her! I remember every single day that I spent in Balghar. Some years ago, when she died—she was then in her 80s—17 of that batch of 25 students were at her funeral! That is the place she has in our hearts.

My elder daughter went to Balghar for just four years. Now she is a married woman with a family and children: but each time she passes Balghar today, she cries!

From Balghar, I went back to Shreyas, as did my other classmates. This was a coeducational school. I do not recall having a single examination in Shreyas. In fact, I remember watching many of my friends (who went to other schools) and wondering why they vanished from the scene for three months every year, with red eyes and so much tension on their faces...what was it that they did during those months?! The very first exam that I took was the school-leaving one: SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate); and no, I was not scared or anything...because I did not even know what the thing was!

What are your most prominent memories of your school years? What did your school give you?

My school taught me to always give some of my time to those less privileged than I. Many of my classmates of those years also give some of their time today, in some way or the other, to the less fortunate. I spend some time every now and then, with some children in a school in Goa, teaching them art and photography. I love to teach adults as well as children. Our school showed us how to be independent, without being harsh. They instilled in us the desire to help those who were not as fortunate as we were.

One of the most precious things that my school gave me was the urge to study my own country. I still long to travel in India today, and see more and more of her stunning beauty. Every Diwali or summer vacation, the entire school would go off to one state of the country and stay there for two whole months. We would fill up five entire bogies of the train, as all of us would travel together. I remember we got to stay in the palace of the Mysore maharaja when we went to Karnataka, thanks to the Sarabhai's contacts with the royal family there: all of us got a dorm inside the palace. During those two months, we would travel around the state in our school bus. In Karnataka, for instance, we saw the Jog Falls, watched dance and music performances, theatre, witnessed navigation on the west coast, and spent an hour every day just learning more about the state. When we returned from these trips, all of us had to perform a play based on one of the stories of that particular state: for instance, I remember that we staged 'Kabuliwallah' after we came back from West Bengal. All these tours gave me a deep sense of rootedness. It was only in our later years that we became aware of social evils like the caste system, the Hindu-Muslim divide and so on. But despite all that, there is this deep sense of rootedness and appreciation of this country's culture and history. You know, Indian youth today are full of excitement about going abroad, but hardly any of them want to see India: they feel it is too dirty, too corrupt. While I agree that there is dirt, and there is corruption, there are also innumerable places and things of interest.

I have not seen a travel programme similar to Leenaben's in any other school. I think it was her unique gift to us. Each and every one of us who went through that programme is still full of curiosity to see our country. I think that is what turned me into a photographer.

I would say, the main gift of Shreyas was that they made school exciting. Why, they made every single subject exciting! We had very good teachers: extraordinary people. Each one was special in some way or the other, dedicated to imparting knowledge, to children specially. You know, we so loved being in school that we never felt like going home. School started early: at 7.30 a.m., and we stayed on even until sundown...despite our coming from happy and well-to-do homes, mind you! We just did not want to leave school!

Another programme that we had in Shreyas, which then we thought was a drag, was to keep the school clean. Students had to do all the cleaning of classrooms, dining hall, playgrounds and everything around. That is how the day would start. After morning assembly, we were handed brooms and mops! What fun!

We had the most fabulous library and were encouraged to visit as much as we could. During our last few months of school, when the annual drama would happen, the best in the field, nationally and internationally well-known people, would come to train us. I remember, our rehearsals would go on till early morning. Those were the months when we stayed in school 24 hours. We had an enormous amphitheatre and our school plays, which were mega productions, were attended by thousands of people.

Our school had the best art department that one could imagine. Under the tutelage of our art teacher, Mr Purnendu Pal, and his directions, we would make all the sets, costumes and props. Not a single thing would be bought from outside except the raw material.

Today, even if I just pass through Ahmedabad, I never fail to go and see Leenaben. She is my mentor.

We had a many-layered fee structure. Parents paid only what they could afford. Ahmedabad was a small town in those days; everybody knew everyone else. No one could hide anything from another. We were just 12 to 15 students to a class. A large number of them have pursued a career in the creative arts. Many also took up mainstream careers.

So, are you and your friends also unusual...in what you did after school? Also, in that you have all kept in touch with each other and know what you are all doing, so many years after leaving school?

No, I do not think that is so unusual today. In my time, perhaps, it was unusual to be in touch; but nowadays, many batches stay connected even after leaving school. Many of my mainstream school friends know what their friends do.

I have many friends who went to mainstream schools but are now doing offbeat work, and I also have friends who went to alternative schools but are now pursuing conventional careers. What is important is that one should have passion for what one is doing. When my friends and I finished our studies, not that I have anything against doctors and engineers, we were all idealistic; and

none of us wanted to go into the mainstream jobs, and we certainly did not want to join government service. So what to do? One had to make an income! So, after my studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda and the Pune Film Institute, I opted to teach in a school. My first job was as a teacher in a mainstream school, which had a liberal principal who gave me free rein. I found the mindset of children when it came to art was that they all drew that typical landscape: of two or three peaks with a sunset/sunrise in between, and about three birds flying in the sky! And the school gave them a small sheet of paper in which they did this! I began the system of giving them reams of paper, and asking them to 'look' at things around them. You know, most of art is in looking, not so much in drawing or painting. So these kids came from mixed backgrounds—some came in cars, others by bus, while some walked—so I gave them the exercise of putting on paper what they saw en route to school. I taught them the importance of giving attention to what one *saw*, in this way.

I find that it is not so important what you do, as long as you *have a passion for what you do*. I find that I can only relate with such people. I find other types of people boring: one can only have social chit-chat with them, one cannot really relate to them...

Yes, while we realise that there is no real formula for passion: would you be able to put your finger on what brings it out in a person?

Well, I have found that most Indian parents are only of two kinds: extremely strict or extremely liberal. There is no in-between. I have found that the children of parents who give enormous space to their children have the room to explore their true passions. Yes, the school—and my parents—did it for some of us.

Did your brother (who, you say, went to a mainstream school) not get the same sense of rootedness as you?

Well, he got his sense of rootedness from our family. But, I got mine from both the school as well as from home.

What was his experience of his school, as compared to yours?

He used to come back in the vacation (during the monsoon, as he went to a school in the hills) and recount wonderful stories of how

there was so much adventure in the hills. I would be so envious, that I remember, once, how—much to the chagrin of my parents—I insisted on being taken out of Shreyas and being admitted to his school. They could not get me to change my mind, and so my poor parents agreed. I went and studied in his school for precisely two months: during which time I got caned 11 times! The headmaster asked me how, when my brother who had been studying there for so many years had not received a single caning, I managed to get beaten 11 times in just two months! They beat me for everything that I did not know. I was used to learning all subjects and being taught in Gujarati, you see. Shreyas was a Gujarati medium school. I remember how, once, my brother was shocked because I could not spell the word ‘February’ when I was 12. (Today, I am the published author of a book¹: he privately believes that I must have dictated it to a secretary with good spelling skills!). So whenever a child could not do something, he met with a beating in that school! I was so fed up of being beaten, I asked my parents to take me back to Shreyas; and they did! Leenabeen readily took me back: you see, I think she had been expecting this to happen.

If you did not learn English in Shreyas, how do you speak fluent English now? Where did you learn to speak and write so well?

I frankly do not think my spoken or written English is that good. Yes, I did write and publish in English. I guess, I just learnt by trying to communicate in that language after I left Shreyas. I would say that my school gave me the confidence to try and communicate in that language—and learn as I tried!

Looking back, I can say that my school instilled in us the passion to achieve *excellence*. Not to be mistaken with *competition*. *Excellence* in everything that one does; in work and in life.

NOTE

¹ *The Dream of Dragon's Children*.

Student Who Went from an Alternative to a Mainstream School

Sharik

Sharik (21 years) is completing his undergraduation course from Oberlin College, Ohio, USA. He is currently taking a year off from the undergraduate programme and is in India. He has already begun working as a jazz pianist at this young age. Born in Germany, he spent the first three years of his life in Europe and then England. Coming to India at the age of four, he first went to an alternative school and later (at the age of 13) switched to a mainstream school.

What was your experience in both types of schools?

The very first school that I attended (at age four) was an alternative one in Bangalore, and I was one of its first students. I was there only for about a year, but I remember liking it. Later, my parents who were new to Bangalore, admitted me to a big, mainstream boys' school. I was about five years old, and I lasted only a week in this school! All that I recollect of this experience is a huge auditorium (later, I was told that it was a classroom!) of about 80 boys, in different stages of being broken in to this new experience of 'school', and their being 'disciplined' by the authorities before one and all. It was traumatic. I felt like one little person in a huge crowd, and I was so overwhelmed and intimidated. I remember I came home crying! There were teeth marks even on my cheek!

So, that was enough for my parents to scout around for a suitable school for me, and on the prompting of a number of other parents and teachers, they chose an alternative school located far

off from the city. On the first day, my parents actually followed me (I was in the school bus) all the way!

How was this experience?

I recall liking it from day one. The first impression was one of outdoor spaces. I could really relate to Nature here. It was not one big concrete mass in the middle of a national highway. The art-oriented work in this school helped me to become an individual. This school encouraged you to think. Everyone was his/her own entity.

But when I was in Class II, we moved to the US for a year; we often did this, over the years, as my father (an academician) would take a sabbatical every now and then. And each time, this school in India would take me back, even in the middle of the year. They were really quite good about it... So I went to a public school in the US for the next year. I did not find it too different from the school I had just come from in India. I found that, like that school here, too, we could be free with the teachers. I made friends easily. When we came back, and I rejoined my old school in India, I felt I was way behind in math. Here, kids were doing fractions in Class III, and I had barely finished learning addition and subtraction in the US! But, luckily for me, in this school in Bangalore, there was no pressure of examinations. We used to go on long nature walks, and often, teaching took place under the banyan tree; like in the olden days in India. Also, their art department was very good. I did not realise just how good, until I left for the United States. I simply assumed that art was part of the curriculum of all schools the world over. Everybody did some art: whether or not they pursued it depending upon their interest.

What makes this school stand out in your memory?

This school was really quite unique: it was a very rural kind of lifestyle. I recall one evening, when the bus was about to leave, and I was stuffing things into my bag, so as to catch it before it left—when the Principal called me and asked me if I would do him a favour. When I said, yes, he asked me to see that the cows (which were on the school campus) were herded together and brought back safely to their sheds! I was particularly struck by the casual way in which he asked me to do this thing; and I recall my parents also remarking on the unusual nature of this request, when I later

told them about it! If I tell people about this kind of incident, it may well sound ridiculous. But it shows you the kind of values they were trying to impart. Their priorities were different.

So you see, these kind of things were not uncommon here...this school put you in touch with the countryside. India is, after all, an agricultural country. We would be made to take off our shoes before we entered a building; our classes were held in rooms with thatched roofs. You could not be indifferent to your own country and its traditions. This school brought out in us an appreciation of Nature and the environment.

Sometimes, education can become so unidimensional: books, classes, tuition. Come back from school, go out for more classes, read more books. And one can keep going on this one track until IIT, and so on. But in our school, other more important things were emphasised...like tilling the soil, for example. (This sort of ties in with the college I go to now in the US: Oberlin's motto is 'Learning and Labour'; to use your hands is considered very important there.)

It was also a very cultural place. There was a great deal of emphasis on cultural activities. A lot of famous people would come to our school and perform in an informal setting. It was a nice atmosphere and there were always people coming. I recall meeting L. Subramaniam and the Dalai Lama. The interesting thing was that you could be in an informal setting with such people. You did not just watch them from afar. I later realised how special this was.

What was it like when it came to competition?

No, there was not any competition. I did feel that that was a bit extreme, especially when it came to sports. I remember the winners being announced on the mike, one Sports Day, and when my name was being announced for winning some race or the other—at precisely that moment, the Principal intervened on the mike and said something about there being no competition in this school. It must have been a coincidence—the timing of his intervention—but I do remember feeling that this was a bit extreme.

If it was so enjoyable, what made you/your parents change to a mainstream school in Class VIII?

My parents could appreciate the 'no exams' philosophy in this school only up to a point. They felt that beyond a stage, it disconnected me

from the real world. It was almost an atmosphere in which anything goes, and they wondered what would happen to me when I would necessarily have to take a Board exam. On that basis, they felt, Class VIII might be a good time for me to switch to a mainstream school.

In fact, they had tried a bit earlier too, when I was 10 or 11 years old, and I remember I just did not want to leave this school. I had to take this entrance test in the mainstream school, and this was to be my very first examination! (You see, I had never had to focus for two whole hours on anything, up until this point!) I really liked my school and was very comfortable there. I wanted to stay with my friends! I did not see my parents' logic. So I just doodled and drew on my exam paper, during the entrance test; and needless to say, I flunked! I did not get in, and I happily continued in the alternative school!

But after Class VII, once again, my father went on a sabbatical to the US, and I went with my parents to that country. Although I had gone in Class V as well, to Boston, this particular visit to the US, when I was in Class VII, was a huge culture shock. There was hardly any discipline. It was not a good experience; not at all. Teachers were teaching kids, who were my age, about things I had never even heard of (unprotected sex? What did that mean?), and I had to fill in all sorts of questionnaires anonymously...it was all quite bizarre.

But when we came back, instead of joining my old school in Class VIII, my parents now took me to that mainstream school, where I had flunked the test earlier! This time, though, I took the test seriously. I prepared for it and passed it (It was six to seven hours of writing test papers!).

And so I joined this school. To my horror, this was an even bigger culture shock than the one in the US had been! Although I did manage to make some friends, most of the kids here were sons and daughters of business tycoons. The parties that I had gone to earlier would begin in the afternoon and get over by the evening. Not here. Parties began only in the night and went on all night long! Going to a party meant walking into a huge house. Seeing boys my age blow a few thousand rupees without a thought. I had never seen that much money before this! Although I went along with this, I later realised that this was not the thing for me. There were quite a few spoilt kids too (In fact, this school has a bad reputation,

even today, of producing spoilt kids. You are a spoilt snob if you come from this school!)).

So I became very shy, because all around me were so obnoxious, loud and even macho, with fast cars and lots of money to throw around...all at age 14 or 15! You see, it was all about being popular! A sort of vicious circle, really. If you were popular, you got to play sports; and once you played sports, you became more popular. No, everyone did not have equal access to sports here, unlike my old school.

On the other hand, there were some really excellent teachers here. The academics were good: tough and rigorous. I only later realised how intellectually stimulating and balanced this was, more than the alternative school I had gone to earlier. There were even debates on politics here. We never debated politics in my old school. We had a choice of Board exams here: ICSE or IGCSE. I chose the latter for its flexibility with choice of subjects. In fact, I know many people who made the same switch of schools that I did, and almost all benefited from both. This was a very good school for the Boards: they prepared you very well. Lots of good teachers ended up joining this school; maybe, they paid them well here? In fact, this school got many of its alumni placed abroad in very good colleges. They had a network with colleges in other countries. It certainly benefited me.

Did most of these students who made a similar switch have the same culture shock as you did?

I do not know if all of them had the same culture shock as I did. Most joined at the Class XI–XII level, by which time most of the worst is already over! In fact, lots of new students join at this stage, and so it is not the same kind of culture shock. You know? So many new students anyway.

What made you take to the piano? Jazz? Do you think either school had much to do with this?

Well, I have been learning music since I was six. I went to the Bangalore School of Music. I have been performing for many years. No, I was not totally passionate about it or anything. There was a similar sort of rat race here, too, in music. You see, there are eight grades of performance, and once you get to Grade 8, you can

qualify for the Royal School of Music, Oxford. So you have all these parents vying to get their child into Grade 8 fastest! By Class XI, I was fed up of all this. I was also playing the sitar. And I could not keep up both. So I just decided that I did not want to go to any more piano lessons. But I chose Oberlin College for its Conservatory of Music. I had always wanted to have music around me: no, not so much for the love of the piano, per se. I like interacting with others while I am playing: it is fun.

Music as a career? Well, I had a sudden realisation of such a possibility when I went to Oberlin. For me, until then, music was something you only did on the side. You could not do this all the time. Yet, here were people before me who were doing music—not as a hobby. I saw some top class musicians here.

Would you say you would not have discovered your talent for music if you had not gone first to an alternative school—like the one you went to? Or do you think you would have found your true passion even if you had gone to the mainstream school all along?

That is a really tough question to answer. It is hard to say. The alternative school placed a big priority on arts. That was the beginning, maybe? Also, one's own attitude to life. I am the sort of person who will step back if another appears better at doing something than I am. I will not step forward and show my (in)ability.

Yes, my philosophy about things may be something I got from that school. I did spend a lot of time meditating, being one with Nature. My sense of observation became heightened when I was there. I was also able to write over there, with a sense of observation. Anything creative: that's what I like. So while in the earlier (alternative) school, I did spend a lot of my time noticing my surroundings, introspecting...all my report cards from that school describe me as 'a dreamer'! Although, I sometimes feel nowadays—I wish I was more of a doer and less of a dreamer! My Dad is so sharp and focussed. I am easygoing (His complaint, in fact, is that life may just pass me by!).

I guess, what I am trying to say is that part of my own temperament may have determined my taking to that school in the way that I did. Being sensitive to Nature, to animals: people going to different schools, maybe they do not get to do this...? Had I gone to the mainstream school from the start: oh, I do not know. It is so tough to say! I might not have been this way. I really do not know...

Former Student of an Alternative School

Avinash

Avinash is presently a professional artist. He studied in two alternative schools in Bangalore: the Valley School and then the Centre for Learning (CFL), where he did his A-levels. After this, he spent another two years at CFL as part of the Post-school Programme (a substitute for an undergraduate programme). During these two years, he studied design under an Italian tutor, and also did short month-long courses in Italy. He practised graphic design for a couple of years after which he moved over to the fine arts. We talked to him about his school education, and here is our dialogue:

What made you or your parents choose such a school for you?

I joined Centre for Learning after eight years at The Valley School (3rd to 10th grade). A year before I completed my 10th grade, a group of teachers broke away from The Valley School and started CFL. The following year, CFL proposed a three-year A-Level programme (equivalent to 11th and 12th of ISC/PUC) and I, with a few of my classmates, moved to CFL. This decision was based primarily on the people—the teachers—who I had grown up with during my previous years at The Valley School. I, and my parents too, respected them not only in their capacity as teachers, but also for their integrity as individuals.

Did you enjoy going to school? Why?

CFL was a very small place and still in its infancy when I joined. The year before, the school consisted of a handful of students and

a couple of rooms and a terrace in a teacher's home. Joining in the seniormost class, we were given and felt a sense of responsibility for the place. It was an exciting and adventurous couple of years that comprised more than just academics. I felt a part of an extended family. There was an atmosphere of being part of an experiment and yet, the environment was caring and secure. The school, being small, one was also able to relate closely across a wide cross-section of age groups.

What were the most enjoyable aspects of being a student in an alternative school?

The relationship with the teachers was one of friendship, support and trust, rather than one of hierarchy or a fear of authority. This helped foster a feeling of lightness without the constant anxiety and pressure about the future. During these years, we were made to feel as partners, even if only in our rather limited capacity, in the growth of the school: helping move from one campus to another, building low-cost geodesic domes that housed the school then—or often taking classes for the younger students. Another memorable aspect was the annual excursions, whether to see historic sites or go trekking and bicycling. We travelled and saw a good deal; and some of our journeys have been reasonably challenging and adventurous.

What were the least enjoyable aspects of going to an alternative school?

Being part of a community that was rather small has its disadvantages. I personally had little other social interaction away from school; and sometimes I missed having a larger circle of friends that did not have anything to do with the school or its activities there.

Did you experience too high expectations from your parents/teacher/Principal? How did you cope?

Following the A-level programme, CFL undertook another experiment, which was called the Post-school Programme (This programme no longer exists at CFL, but is now offered at The Valley School). This was a rather unstructured and possibly risky alternative to a bachelor's degree programme. As the school was not equipped to provide help internally at this level to our varied

individual interests, they put us in touch with professionals in our respective fields, to function as mentors. Those of us who were able to get a distance-education degree certification did, and some of us did not.

The question of expectations was more pertinent at this stage. The post-school programme was started primarily to engage and explore the teachings of J. Krishnamurti, while studying for under-graduation in parallel. There was a high expectation from some of the teachers to be involved deeply in the teachings. I finally left the post-school programme prematurely, because at that time I was not ready, and did not have enough 'real life' experience, to relate to the teachings.

What are you most grateful to your school for, today? What is/are the most valuable thing(s) your school education gave you?

In retrospect, an introduction to the teachings and questions raised by J. Krishnamurti was one of the most valuable things that the school gave me. The school helped begin a journey of introspection and in making one aware of the numerous seemingly transparent and habitual psychological movements of the mind. They provided us with tools as it were, by which to look into and question the assumptions by which we live, both at a personal as well as at a sociological level.

What do you wish your school had taught you, but which it did not? What did your school not equip you to deal with?

The school did its best to encourage each student to follow what she or he had an aptitude for, irrespective of social or parental pressures. Although this made for a very secure and nurturing environment, for myself, I wish, sometimes, that the school had pushed me in certain academic subjects even if I did not have a natural calling for them. It would have helped build a stronger general foundation.

How do you define success? What do you think are the parameters to measure it?

A person is successful when s/he has a sense of emotional intelligence, by which I mean that one is able to be aware of psychological

movements as they occur and not become slaves to those movements. This would apply not only in very subjective circumstances, but also to larger movements at a sociological level. A sense of emotional well being and security or belief in oneself can be taken to be good indicators (This being my ideal, I personally do not consider myself particularly successful, but is something I strive towards...).

What do you think are the THREE most important qualities a person needs in order to lead a successful life?

Honesty, a capacity to be open-minded and will power.

Do you feel that you would have had a better life today, if you had gone to a mainstream school instead of an alternative school? Why?

I was never self-conscious about being in an alternative school, but I do feel rather privileged to have grown up in the situation that I did, with a great deal of support from parents and teachers alike. The school tried to prepare us for, and inculcate in us, a wider and deeper perception of life in general; one that did not revolve around intense competition, achievements, career and money alone, but also help begin an inward journey which explores and questions the complex movements that make up this life.

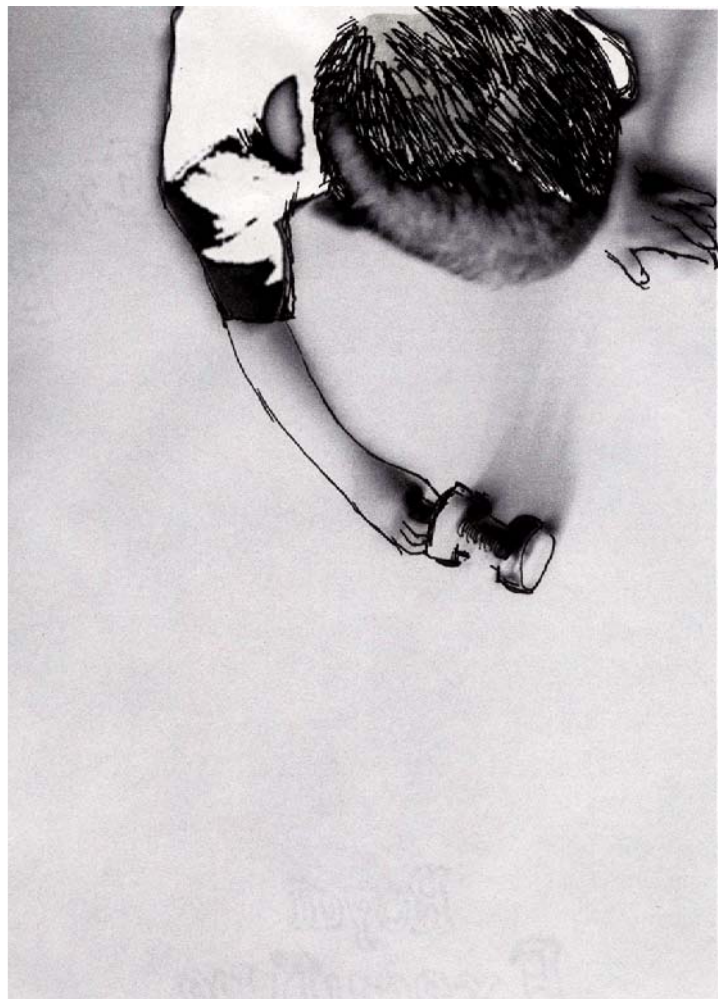


Illustration by Ayisha Abraham

Some Efforts after School Hours

Come after School

Sarojini Vittachi, Neeraja Raghavan, Kiran Raj

What are the options for those who go to government or mainstream schools? Grouped as they are in classes of 40 or more students, with one harried teacher fighting against time and pressure to ‘cover the syllabus’, is there any way in which their learning can suit the individual’s pace and inclinations? Of course, the lucky amongst them could be enjoying learning from imaginative teachers in joyous environments. But for those who are not getting to learn joyously, can they be exposed to innovative ways of learning as well?

As many of the interviewees and writers in this compilation have pointed out, ‘school’ and ‘education’ are not confined to the four walls of an institution. Many have drawn on family, home, out-of-school experiences for some of their most valuable learning. If a child is caught in the grind of mechanical rote learning and dull teaching, are there other outlets for such a child?

In fact, there are many dedicated people who are engaged in adding value to the lives of precisely such children. In this section, we showcase just a few as illustrative examples. At Chinnabadi, Andhra Pradesh, children find an after-school play centre where they are also guided in their studies. Association for India’s Development, Bangalore, ropes in young professionals to give of their time in the evenings and help slum children learn innovatively. In Pune, Maharashtra, Khelghar draws timid girls out of their shells and gives them ‘another’ home. Surely such examples abound all over the country; ours is not meant to be a representative sample, let alone a comprehensive coverage. We would just like to bring to our readers a flavour of what is possible—after an entire work day— if there is a sincere desire to effect a change.

G Ed Plus met a few such individuals and saw their good work. Here are the accounts, in the pages that follow...

ASSOCIATION FOR INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT (AID)

Location: Chennai and Bangalore

Philosophy: To promote sustainable, equitable and just development. In solidarity with non-violent people's struggles, AID supports grassroot organisations in India and initiates efforts in various interconnected spheres such as education, livelihood, natural resources, health, women's empowerment and social justice.

What is different? In education, AID believes in the philosophy of the joyful way of learning. Working with several scientists, AID volunteers come up with various science experiments which may be performed in the classrooms.

For instance, five young professionals in Bangalore give their time once a week, in the evenings, to help slum children with different subjects. Come Thursday, and you will find the person who has volunteered to teach mathematics there, on the dot. Looking at his zeal and enthusiasm, it is hard to believe that he has come there after a full workday in the office, and he seems perfectly at home, sitting in a dimly lit room in the slum, helping a few children learn math in an interesting way. Similarly, with four other subjects on the other four days of the five-day week, four other volunteers add that zing to the learning process.

AID-India is working in tandem with the Tamil Nadu Education Department with focus on 71 schools in Latur Block in Kanchipuram district and 113 schools in Vembakkam Block in Tiruvannamalai district. Recognising that most of the children in Classes III to V are unable to read Tamil fluently, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) has initiated a pilot programme for remedial action. The programme is being implemented by schoolteachers, with AID-India providing training, developing learning materials and helping with appropriate field support and documentation. The aim is to get all children in the Classes III to V to read fluently within a three-month period.

In Bangalore, the volunteers have been conducting *Joy of Learning* classes in corporation and government schools, by supporting the integrated health programme in some blocks and by

supporting a *sustainable agriculture intervention* in Magadi, to name a few of the initiatives.

AID-India has also established night schools in various slums in Tamil Nadu and Bangalore. Various activities like painting competitions, plays, science exhibitions and so on are conducted by AID volunteers with the children coming to the night schools.

Compassion where there is suffering
Conviction that the compassion is strong enough to eliminate suffering
Courage to make this conviction a reality.

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E-mail: balaji@freeshell.org, info@aidindia.org

Website: <http://aidindia.org>

CHINNABADI

Location: In Chinnappeta, 7 km west of Chennethapalli in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh.

Philosophy: To experiment with alternative methods of sustainable development.

What is different: Do not be surprised to see boisterous children busy playing badminton, cricket or *kho-kho*. Most children come here just to play, make friends and go home.

In Timbaktu Collective, Chiguru is a group that manages the education of children. Chiguru had started an evening resource centre for the children coming from in and around Chennethapalli village. Most schools are locked in the evenings and Chinnabadi provides them space to relax or study at their own pace. At present, over 50 children from the ages of 7 to 15 come from other nearby schools and from schools managed by Chiguru.

Chinnabadi used to be a regular day school till the local government school began to perform well and the Collective encouraged the children to go there. It has now been converted into an evening learning centre and children from the whole village come

here after school hours and use this space as a play space, a library and a study centre.

When the dust settles and the players go home or stay back, it is time to study. This goes on from 7.00 p.m. to about 8.30 p.m. One of the teachers of Prakruthi Badi (which is the main school), who stays here, coordinates the activities. Children do not have academic classes like in the other learning centres, but they are *guided* in their studies. This is their own space for games, studies, singing, dancing and dramas in their village, which makes it a very special centre.

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Telephone: +91-8559-240149/240335

Fax: Not available

E-mail: timbaktu@vsnl.com

Website: www.timbaktu.org/

ILAI GNARKAL EDUCATION CENTRE

Location: The school is inside the city area of Auroville, Tamil Nadu.

Philosophy: The school follows the fundamental principles of education by The Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram: joy, freedom, learning by doing and self-learning.

What is different? Ilaignarkal School was started 30 years ago to bring education to the young people's place of work, giving classes in their units after work hours. For this, they arrange for voluntary teachers and trainers to take up the activities.

Ilaignarkal Education Centre manages an after-work school for day workers. The evening school also works much on the same principle as the day school, except that it takes in older students who are unskilled or semi-skilled workers. These students are usually at work during the day and come to evening school for improving their communication and work skills, and for learning basic language, mathematics as well as general knowledge.

Ilaignarkal School also lays emphasis on vocational training for improving the skills of the students to take up suitable jobs after graduating from school. The training courses start with lessons in Tamil and English, simple mathematics and social history. Apart from learning the 3Rs, students learn tailoring, accountancy,

computer data entry, carpentry and gardening, among other skills. This has led to a need for relevant equipment and materials for training purposes.

The school has around 40 learners between the ages of 15 and 30 years and breaks up into one to three groups, depending on student requirements and teacher availability. Some examples of graduates of this school are:

- Semi-skilled household workers who have had little or no education, learn at least two languages (Tamil and simple English), basic math, home economics, cooking, arts and crafts, and natural healing methods. These workers are given jobs as service industry managers, shopkeepers, skilled workers in handicrafts and other appropriate jobs. Twelve hundred such students have passed out in the last 10 years.
- Semi-skilled to unskilled office workers take training in simple language (Tamil and English), basic math, note-taking, book-keeping, typing, elementary accountancy and the skills needed to be librarians or reporters.
- Other students include those learning skills such as carpentry, construction, accountancy, library maintenance and so on. These students are then typically placed as office assistants, painters, draftsmen and so on. The school also helps place them in certain enterprises and units, so as to allow them to take up greater responsibilities in their chosen field.

Ilaignarkal Education Centre also runs a teacher-training programme for 10 night schools in the villages in and around the Auroville area. *Tamil Ulagam* is the unit which runs these 'after-work schools' for both working children and school-going children below the age of 15 years. Ilaignarkal School provides the training programme and helps in preparing simple teaching materials for rural teachers with an aim to create a joyful learning atmosphere. The school also plays the role of a model school to test the contents of play methods.

Ilaignarkal emphasises the preservation of Tamil culture, language, literature and heritage. Research materials are being regularly produced; for example, wooden wheel bullock cart, *Kolam* (floor drawing), palmyra tree, and a collection of literary letters, selected poems and their translations by eminent personalities.

A monthly Tamil Newsletter is being published regularly for the past nine years as an essential educative and communication tool.

Ilaignarkal conducts summer camps and workshops for the teaching community on various cultural themes. Resource persons from Mysore, Chennai, Pondicherry, Vedaranyam, Gandhigramam, Tanjore and various other educational centres are invited to conduct these.

Ilaignarkal collaborates with the outreach educational programmes of Auroville, both for men and women. A monthly moonlight gathering of young people at Ilaignarkal is a regular feature that allows collective learning and sharing.

Address: SAARAM Community, Auroville, Villupuram District 605101, Tamil Nadu

Telephone: +91-413-2623773

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Website: Not available

KHELGHAR

Location: 1.5 km from Laxminagar slum in Pune, Maharashtra.

Philosophy: This is based on the experiences of teachers during the past eight years of working with children, which include the following:

- To provide opportunities to children so that they know the joy of learning,
- To work for the development of different learning abilities in children,
- To help children overcome hurdles in their school education and
- To encourage children to decide their goals that will facilitate their own development along with that of their community.

What is different? Coming from conservative backgrounds, the girls were inhibited to voice their opinions in the presence of any man, even if they were family members. After volunteers helped them gain confidence, they did a turnaround—they celebrated

Women's Day with speeches and cultural programmes in front of their families!

Palakneeti Pariwar Trust, which started in Khelghar in 1996, noticed a decline in the number of girls who used to attend the evening school. Because of safety considerations, many of the families did not want their children to attend tuitions in the evening. Thus, Anand Sankul was started mainly for such girls and very small boys.

Since 1999, every evening, girls and boys assemble in a tin shed in the slum area of Laxminagar. In Khelghar, the close of each day brings a bustle of activity from children who come here after a full day at school. This is their 'other' home where they can revise the day's lessons done at school—a place where they discover the joy of learning.

At present, there are about 80 children who come to Khelghar after a day at school. Each class has about 10 children with one teacher to help them learn.

The children who come here are first-generation learners. They come from the slum area of Kothrud in Pune. Most are children of migrant labourers who come from nearby villages in search of work. They attend government and private schools, but their academic performance is usually below par. To encourage these boys and girls, the teaching staff at Khelghar helps to create a conducive atmosphere for children to learn.

There are two rooms where classes are held and another for audio visual activities. This classroom was built with the help of some of the parents. This was encouraging, as education usually takes a backseat, especially when the girls in such families are responsible for housekeeping and taking care of their siblings.

Initially, about 10 to 15 girls came to study after school hours. Today, there are about 33 of them. The girls between the ages of 6 and 18 years are divided into different learning groups: Classes I to IV, V to VII and VIII to X.

Most often, the girls would discontinue their studies after Class VIII due to lack of interest or parental indifference. The biggest challenge for the volunteers was to encourage the girl and her parents to continue studying till Class X. This year, three girls have appeared for the Class X examination. The girls are encouraged to empower themselves with knowledge and thus gain confidence.

Art and craft material is given to children to discover their creative side. Subjects are reinforced with the use of flash cards and charts.

Addresses: Palakneeti Pariwar Trust, Amruta Clinic, Athawale Corner,
Karve Road, Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411004, Maharashtra
Mrs Subadah Joshi, Guruprasad Apartments, 23 Anand Niketan
Society, Karve Nagar, Pune 411052, Maharashtra
Anand Sankul, Laxminagar, Near Dahanukar Colony, Kothrud,
Pune 411029, Maharashtra

Telephone: +91-20-25437119, 25457328 (Khelghar)

Fax: Not available

E-mail: shubha_kh@yahoo.co.in

Website: Not available

PRERNA

Location: In the premises of Study Hall Educational Foundation, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.

Philosophy: School reform must engage the intellectual and emotional energies of all involved, including teachers, parents and community members, so that *everyone* is responsible.

What is different? Prerna is part of a distance learning network, Digital Study Hall project. This was built by computer scientists and education experts who collaborated to build a distance learning system that seeks to offer resource-starved schools (in villages and urban slums of India), human and content resources comparable to that received by middle-class students in cities. For example, high-quality lectures digitally captured at the headquarters are made available to the village schools, and homework and questions from the village schools can be handled by the staff or the volunteers at the headquarters.

Prerna, which means 'inspiration', was founded in 1987 by Dr Urvashi Sahni. This school runs in the afternoon, in the premises of Study Hall for girls who come from the neighbourhood. These girls come from families of construction workers, labourers, domestic servants, mechanics or washermen. Some of the girls work as domestic help in the morning and attend school thereafter.

A special attempt is made to make this a very happy experience for the girls, in order to counter their grim home environments.

The teaching staff at Prerna tries to empower the girls and give them a way to be resilient and have higher aspirations for themselves.

The medium of instruction is Hindi and the syllabus followed is that of the Uttar Pradesh Board. Art, drama and music are used liberally to teach. The students of Prerna use all the facilities in Study Hall, including computers, the sports field, the art room and the dance room. Besides this, many of the Study Hall teachers work with them. Today, the school has a student strength of 200 and staff strength of 6.

The school is funded by Study Hall Educational Foundation and philanthropists. However, the girls are charged a nominal amount of money every month, which is just a commitment fee.

The girls say that they consider this the happiest place and that they have found new meaning in their lives because of the education they receive, and more importantly, the caring environment created by the teachers.

On an experimental basis, two girls have been integrated from Prerna to Study Hall. This has proved to be a happy experience for the girls. It is very easy for other private schools to replicate this model with their own funds. It is economical because the facilities of the morning school are put to good use by the students (in both the morning and afternoon sessions) and they cost the school nothing extra.

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Telephone: +91-522-2300977

Fax: Not available

E-mail: urvashisahni@yahoo.co.uk

Website: <http://planetvidyaschools.com/school/studyhallschool>

THULIR

Location: In a tribal village in the Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu.

Philosophy: Their philosophy is threefold:

1. Children from disadvantaged sections in the rural areas need an education that will help them gain self-respect and live with dignity.

2. Children have a natural curiosity and a capacity to learn, which needs to be nurtured, giving them space and the right environment.
3. Children need the company of sympathetic adults who can encourage/motivate them to acquire skills and knowledge.

What is different? As it gets dark and children start heading back home, someone points to the sky and says: 'Look! That star is moving!' Once it is clarified that it probably is an artificial satellite, others discover more such moving lights. A little later, everyone takes turns to peer at the moon through the binoculars.

Set in natural surroundings, Thulir is a place for children to access learning resources that are not available to them in their homes or schools, like art materials, books, lab facility or computers and so on. Children attend supplementary classes or study by themselves to prepare for examinations away from their noisy homes.

After 4.00 p.m., when the school gets over for the day, the children from government and private schools in Kottapatti and Sittilingi attend evening classes at Thulir. Many children come here directly from school and stay on till after 6.30 p.m.

At Thulir, the attempt is to use the environment around as a focal point to do exercises in learning various skills and subjects. For example, the children make a Nature calendar where all the plants that flower in a given month/season are observed and recorded. The gardening activity is another important occasion for learning. Weeding out unwanted plants becomes an occasion to discuss various types of roots that plants have. Butterflies/birds/herbal plants all become interesting subjects to study, while documentation offers opportunities in improving writing and reading skills. Besides, dealing with subjects that are familiar helps boost the self-confidence of the learners.

After an entire day at school, the children do not seem to be in a hurry to rush home. This is where they re-learn at a relaxed pace.

Balu, a Class IX dropout, has collected leaves from the forest and is creating a herbarium. He used to attend the local school where his experience was that teachers destroyed his confidence. After chatting with Balu, it was learnt that he had an in-depth knowledge of the forest and its flora. As he creates a herbarium, he comes every day with new leaves and says with confidence,

'Akka, this is the "Aana" leaf. Its fruits can be eaten. This is the "Asa" leaf. The creeper is used as a rope.'

Other small groups use familiar materials confidently by themselves to play in small groups. They use cards with picture pairs and English words to play memory games. Some play various math games with dominoes. Outside, a few other older girls are sitting by themselves and revising their schoolwork. They have a test tomorrow and want to study by themselves for it. One or two girls head straight for the English section, take out the workbooks, written by a Thulir team member, and start working on them undisturbed by the noise around! The girls loudly read from the popular English book 'Mira'—proud at the sound of their English pronunciation!

Anuradha, founder of Thulir, calls out to say that she is starting the English conversation class. The regulars for this class gather around her on the grass outside Thulir, since it is pleasant weather outside as the sun goes down.

Address: Thulir, Tribal Health Initiative, Sittilingi P. O.,
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Fax: Not available

E-mail: thulir@tribalhealth.org

Website: www.thulir.org

THE TILONIA NIGHT SCHOOLS

Location: In Rajasthan, in the arid and rocky village of Tilonia, one of the 110 villages of Silora Block in Ajmer District.

Philosophy: Commitment to gender and caste equality, to honesty and integrity, and to environmental protection.

What is different? The schools have a Children's Parliament. The electorate is made up of all children attending the night school for a period of two years or more. The criteria for eligibility are determined by the children themselves. Polling, by secret ballot, and in the presence of impartial observers, is held in each of the night schools, where polling booths are set up. The elected members then select the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the Speaker of the House. When the term of two years comes to an end, the President will announce the holding of fresh elections. This process, of electing

independent, non-party members to the Children's Parliament every two years, has provided the children an opportunity for first-hand experience with democracy. In the night schools, literacy shares the space with practice in democratic functioning. This, in turn, has made the children more effective in dealing with the present, as well as in being equipped for the future.

The Tilonia Night School was initiated by the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC). This was a small group of young, idealistic university graduates fired by an inner call to work for the poor and work with the people. Education was recognised as the foundation for any development-related initiative. Thus the need to provide education, with a focus on issues related to development, was perceived as an imperative. As the scale of SWRC's initiatives grew, it moved in the direction of becoming a 'barefoot college', a system that is open to the common man, woman and child.

This project began in a small way, with three schools in the year 1975. This number grew to 9 in 1980 and to 29 in 1981. In the beginning, only boys attended these schools. Gradually, one or two girls joined in. Today, more than 60 per cent of the students in the night schools are girls. Nearly 4,000 girls and over 2,250 boys, who tend cattle during the day, attend these schools after dark.

The schools are located in far-flung villages but are easily identified, if one drives in at night, by the solar lamp that lights up the school. The school works for two to three hours every evening, not enough to cover the standard curriculum; but the motivation of the children is so high that they do cover a lot of ground.

The teachers have to be residents of the village. There are two teachers, on an average, for every school. The strength of the school varies, but it could be as high as 50. The selection and the continuous training of the teachers are in-built for the system to work. Young men and women, with at least a few years of high school education and an aptitude for teaching, are trained on the job. The monthly meetings constitute an important part of the training. The meetings are a forum for the sharing of ideas and experiences, and also an educational process. They have proved to be the crucible for new learning through the discussion of classroom and administrative issues that concern the teachers.

The curriculum is developed with the specific communities in mind and contains both what is familiar and what is relevant. Its

major thrust was to value and reinforce the skills and abilities of the people in the village: the artisan, the craftsman, the storyteller, the puppeteer, the manual worker, the herder of sheep and goats, and the woman who could cook, sew and conserve resources. A secondary thrust was to demystify academic expertise and to translate the formal knowledge received in higher education into viable and feasible strategies for the rural communities.

Apart from academics, other life skills are taught, such as sewing, fabricating at the mechanical workshop, candle-making, chalk-making and carpentry.

A mobile library functions for the school system. Although many of them have only moderate reading levels, they can take the occasional storybook home for a week or two. Occasionally, there is a video screening arranged for the children on themes of literacy, health, women's rights or environmental regeneration.

The local bard, the wandering storyteller, a midwife, a health worker—any one of them can be a resource person for the night school. This brings the local community into the school; but what is more important is that it enables the children to respect their own cultural traditions and to learn directly from the practitioners.

The children wanted an opportunity to meet children from other villages and other parts of the district. So, the idea of the Children's Fair came about. This became the night-school children's very own annual fair. The fair has a variety of activities, which combine learning with a great deal of fun. These include games, puzzles, origami, toy-making, use of waste material and so on.

There are several anecdotes and success stories, but two of them stand out for their boldness and uniqueness. One was the case of Dev Karan, the Speaker of the Children's Parliament, who was able to bring two rival politicians together—a feat hailed by all in the village as a miracle.

The second is the story of Kaushalya, who was the Prime Minister, until she left her village to get married. As a young daughter-in-law, she was able, after months of persuasion, to get her village to agree to implement a piped water supply. Single-handedly, she persuaded 56 families to pay a monthly fee of Rs 20 for water connections. The result was the installation of the first solar-operated pump for filling water in a 100,000-litre tank, which supplies safe drinking water regularly, to the whole village. And this happened in a state where no village pays for water supplied by the

government. Both these examples speak for the creative energy of the children, when they are allowed to think and speak for themselves.

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Illustration by Ayisha Abraham

Afterword

Our overall feeling at the end of this book was that we would like to be children again! If, like Alice in Wonderland, we could disappear into another time and place, we would wish to go to one of the schools mentioned in the Directory. Why? Because these schools are child-centred, relating learning to child's interests and needs, and learning is experiential.

We have learnt a lot from putting this book together. The interaction we have had with practitioners and educationists together with the collation of information, visits, and chance encounters with many who were exploring alternatives to existing systems of education left us full of hope for the future of this country's children.

Here are some of the lessons we have learnt from the queries that confronted us:

What is common to those who set out to effect a change in the education system?

We found that the most marked trait of those who initiated such efforts was an almost complete lack of aggression. They seemed to be characterised by gentleness, distaste for publicity and shrinking from the limelight. In fact, for the purpose of gathering information for the Directory, this was a marked disadvantage! Those who were doing the most exciting work were the least interested in having it come out in print! Their main focus was their immediate work, the ways in which their students were showing the impact of their teaching methods, and it mattered little to them how their work was represented elsewhere. 'Those who wish to find out will come and form their own impressions,' said Malathi of Vikasana.

The stamp of the person and the philosophy with which he or she began a school was evident in the schools surveyed. For instance, Rama Reddy of Namma Shaale is constantly aware of the vision of Maria Montessori, as are those who run schools along the lines suggested by David Horsburgh, J. Krishnamurti and

K. Padmanabha Menon. Not surprisingly, this keeps out the individual selves of the current heads of schools and puts the vision of the founder at centrestage.

What was common to the schools that were exploring alternatives in education?

The buildings were simple, aesthetic and unostentatious like their Principals or Founders! Again, when we went around visiting a few of these schools, this was a disadvantage—in that we could not easily spot the schools or their heads! There was a marked atmosphere of relaxation and leisure, not the usual hustle and bustle that characterises a typical school. Nobody seemed to be in a tearing hurry to ‘get anywhere’, but each one seemed to be deeply absorbed in the task at hand.

Children looked happy and relaxed, too. They greeted us without inhibition and were very friendly. The presence of school structures (timetables, school bells) was not noticeable, although these may well have been in place. What was palpable was tangible enjoyment in learning, teaching and just being in the school.

Almost all the schools we visited had a class size that did not exceed 30, and were very particular about keeping the numbers down, so that personal attention could be paid to each child. They were also experimenting with the curricula and Examination Boards to which the school would be affiliated. They were not content with just going along with the status quo.

A concern for a different pace of learning for each child and an exploration of ways of keeping this in the forefront was another common characteristic. ‘We don’t want to cast every child in a common mould,’ was an oft-repeated phrase.

Perceptible was an absence of hierarchy between the teacher and student, principal and student. For instance, we were pleasantly surprised to see a boy sneak up from behind and tap on the shoulder of Ms Suzanne Buckley, Trustee of Sri Atmananda Memorial School, and run away, giggling, as she responded in kind! ‘In how many schools does this kind of playful relationship exist between the school’s management and the students?’ we wondered.

What, then, makes for a good alternative school? And how many of these attributes can be replicated in a mainstream government or private school?

Barring the small class size, which the huge school-going population does not allow, we feel the following are not only the essential features of a good alternative school, but can well be replicated in any school:

- A well-articulated school philosophy that has the child at its centre.
- A principal, parents and teachers who are constantly included in the implementation and practice of this philosophy.
- Training and retraining of teachers.
- Emphasis on sports, art, drama and playful ways of learning, instead of the complete focus on academics, to the exclusion of everything else.
- A well-stocked library, well-equipped laboratories and easy access to the use of these by teachers as well as children.
- Experimentation with class and school structures so as to break the 'uniform mould' that a child is expected to fit into, and instead make an effort to fit the mode of teaching to suit the child.
- More activities, fewer lectures used by teachers in their day-to-day teaching.
- Exploration into innovative methods of evaluation, that again allow for different paces and abilities of children.
- Conferences and workshops that allow the school to keep abreast of latest developments in the field of education.

We found that a child-centred education cannot be:

- Strait-jacketed
- Closed-ended
- Exclusively content driven
- Wholly measurable in its results

A child-centred education should be:

- Focussed more on HOW to learn rather than WHAT to learn.
- Driven by the aim of teaching how to live in harmony with one's natural and social environment.
- Oriented towards the development of critical and creative faculties.
- Flexible enough to allow for the flowering of an individual who cannot be stereotyped.

Our exploration also led us to question what was wrong in having the common aspirations of doing well in exams, getting a well-paid job and settling down. Is alternative schooling only for those with unconventional aspirations? Did a student of an alternative school have less of a chance of getting a lucrative job? And so we talked to a number of people who went to alternative schools and are now well settled in their careers, or who took the decision to send their child to an alternative school and are not worried about the capacity of their child to deal with today's stresses. The interviews that are scattered throughout this book speak for themselves.

By and large, we found that while alternative schools did shift their focus from being overly concerned about exams and results, their students eventually did 'make it' in the outside world, some not always in the conventionally defined jobs. People interviewed felt the experience of alternative education enabled them or their children to discover their special interests and talents and that examinations and alternative schooling, for instance, were not mutually exclusive.

Some of the ideas, approaches and methods used can go to scale, benefiting more children in the country. The principle of being child-centred, starting with the child's knowledge and interest, can certainly be replicated in more schools and learning centres.

The mass education system can be influenced through its policy bodies so that there are changes in the curricula and methods of teaching. In this regard, our work suggested that teacher-training (and retraining) for change and development was a critical aspect of alternative approaches. Through national level policy bodies on one hand and community level action, on the other, environments that are imaginative and exciting can be created to enhance learning.

The best of the schools we covered believed in what they did. As Paulo Coelho said, 'If you believe in something with passion, the world conspires to make it happen'. They worked on the outer and the inner-worldly useful skills and knowledge, and, at the same time, values for life and living in the community and on this planet. Their educational strategies and methods of teaching included the development of both in the individual. They encouraged freedom of expression 'to be yourself', for each child to be stretched to his/her capacity.

The schools we covered endeavoured to be more democratic and participative, involving the community, the children and their parents.

Who are the teachers?

We found that children themselves are their own best teachers, and teachers were more open to learn and relearn throughout their professional life. Relevance of what is taught and learnt is essential to the child. We found it was best to start with what the child knows and to build on that. This would then encourage new ways of seeing, doing, being and learning.

Measurement of effectiveness must be done on a regular basis; the best schools were not carried away with their own ideas of innovation, of how children and young adults learn. Assessment of the school's work, evaluation and feeding back of the results is critical. Change is part of the process.

One of the most trenchant remarks about *what alternative education is—and is not*—was a comment made by a world-famous man of great insight, George Bernard Shaw. He said, 'What we call education and culture is for the most part nothing but substitution of reading for experience, of literature for life, of obsolete fictions for contemporary experience.'

Our most important lesson in this entire project has been the unnecessary polarisation that seems to have emerged in the minds of many: education is either competitive and examination-oriented, as in mainstream schools, or learning at your own pace, and not necessarily doing well in exams. The apparent tension between the two approaches, of pulling in opposite directions, we found to be irrelevant. Rather, we would suggest a blending, a harmony of what is—in the child, the teacher and the school...with no compulsive desire to reach THERE...but to enjoy the HERE and NOW.



Illustration by Ayisha Abraham

Directory of Alternative Schools in India

ANDHRA PRADESH

Timbaktu Collective
Sumavanam Village School
Rishi Valley Education Centre
Sloka, the Steiner School
Lakshya (part of Blooming Buds School)
Vidyaranya High School
Abhaya School
Centre For Learning (CFL)
Diksha—A Waldorf School

GUJARAT

Anand Niketan
Shreyas Foundation
The Riverside School

KARNATAKA

Ananya Shikshana Kendra
Gear Innovative International School
Bhavya
Namma Shaale
Prakriya Green Wisdom School
Brindavan Education Trust
Poorna Learning Centre
Silver Queen Public School
The Valley School (KFI)
Vikasana School
Sameeksha
Sita School, Society for Educational Exploration
Centre For Learning (CFL)
Deena Bandhu School

Bala Balaga Creative Education Trust
Jyothy English Medium School
The Poorna Pragnya Learning Centre

KERALA

The Choice School
Sri Atmananda Memorial School
The Gurukul
Kanavu
Pazhassi Raja Tribal Vidyalaya

MAHARASHTRA

Tridha Rudolf Steiner School
Anand Niketan
The Pragat Shikshan Sanstha's Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan
Aksharnandan
Sahyadri School
Vigyan Ashram—Rural Development Education System (RDES)
Gram-Mangal
Khelghar

NEW DELHI

Ankur—Society for Alternatives in Education
Saakshar—run by The Vigyan Vijay Foundation
Lavenir (the future), The Gnostic Centre.

PONDICHERRY

Bright's High School
Primrose School

RAJASTHAN

Digantar
Vidya Bhawan Senior Secondary School and Vidya Bhawan Public
School

TAMIL NADU

Isai Ambalam School
New Creation School
The School
Abacus Montessori School
Alpha To Omega Learning Centre
Headstart School
TVS Educational Society
Footsteps
The Children's Garden Higher Secondary School
Thulir
Puvudham Learning Centre
Vidyodaya School
Sholai School
Mahakavi Bharathiyar Higher Secondary School

UTTAR PRADESH

Pragyan School
Asmita
Study Hall Educational Foundation
Rajghat Besant School

UTTARAKHAND

Lakshmi Ashram
Society for Integrated Development of the Himalayas
Shri Bhuvneshwari Parayavan Vidhyalaya

WEST BENGAL

Siksha-Niketan
Swanirvar
Loreto Day School (LDS)
Vikramshila Education Resource Society
Shikshamitra
Patha Bhavana

TIMBAKTU COLLECTIVE

Location: In Chennethapalli Mandal of Anantapur District, a couple of kilometres off the Bangalore–Hyderabad highway.

Philosophy: To experiment with alternative methods of sustainable development.

What is different? Bringing education to Chennethapalli Mandal has given hope to children of landless farmers who otherwise would not have any chance to find out how learning can be made fun. ‘Every laughter of a child is a spark of hope for the future of mankind.’

In 1990, a small group of development activists located themselves in a 32-acre plot of dry, degraded land. They gave it the name Timbaktu (*Sarihaddu Rekha* in Telugu—where the earth meets the sky). Today, a small community of volunteers, committed to developmental and ecological regeneration, have settled here. The team of 60 members work in about 100 villages of Chennethapalli, Roddam and Ramagiri mandals of Anantapur District, serving about 30,000 marginalised people.

During their stay in Timbaktu, its members realised that the children in the community who passed Class VII could not read or write fluently. As a result they dropped out of the government schools they were attending. They were in danger of becoming misfits, in their village as well as in the ‘modern, educated’ world.

Today, there are over 80 children who look forward to attending school.

Timbaktu Collective initiated the Alternative Education Programme in November 1992. This is managed by *Chiguru*, an educational arm of Timbaktu. Amid its 32 acres of greenery, it houses a non-formal learning centre called *Prakruthi Badi* (Nature School) at Chennethapalli, three day schools (*Prakruthi Badi*, *Shyapuram Badi* and *Venella Badi*), one evening school at Chinnapeta called *Chinna Badi* and one residential school (*Timbaktu Badi*) in Timbaktu. Of these schools, only *Prakruthi Badi* has classes up to Class X.

The teaching faculty consists partially of senior teachers, who come from farther away and are attracted by Timbaktu Collective’s vision of an alternative education. They are here because they love to teach. The next level of teachers consists of a group of young

people, who were recruited from the local villages and trained by the senior teachers and through orientation trips to other schools. All teachers attend regular internal trainings and exposure visits.

These schools follow the state syllabus. The aim of the schools is to reintegrate the children into government schools. The children are encouraged to attend state-run examinations for Classes VII and X. The children appear as private candidates for these examinations as the school is not recognised by the state government. Many students have been able to rejoin regular schools and have adjusted well. The school has developed its own methodology in teaching math, science, social studies, Telugu, Hindi, and English. Students of Classes I to V are given activity based worksheets in math and Telugu. The goal is to make learning fun and therefore arouse students' interest in their studies. Motivated students learn quicker and better than those under pressure.

Apart from their classrooms, the schools have access to a well-stocked library and well-equipped environmental science lab for older students.

School runs first from 9.00 a.m. till 2.00 p.m. after which there is a flurry of activity for the next one and a half hours, as the children get involved in arts and craft. This is followed by an hour of play and a snack. After this, school is over. However, children seldom rush home...they linger on for more fun and games.

In the afternoon classes, the children are absorbed in working with their hands by doing embroidery (woollen or ordinary), tailoring, bag making, drawing, clay work and gardening. These finished products are marketed to encourage the children to earn and learn.

Children in these schools spend a lot of time singing, dancing and playing. They participate in school programmes, village festivals and gatherings. A lot of emphasis is placed on the traditional folk songs and dances of the local area. The children enjoy these activities and learn to value their local cultural heritage.

A year ago, Aparna was a sad confused girl. Her abusive father killed her mother and he was sent to prison. With no one to look after Aparna, her little brother and sister, Timbaktu took them under their wing. Today Aparna is laughing and singing again. Although she is still sometimes afraid in the night, she has found a new home and is allowed to have a happy childhood. Aparna

hopes to go to college, to either become a police inspector or a collector in Chennethapalli or to become a teacher in Timbaktu, so that she can help other children to learn.

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SUMAVANAM VILLAGE SCHOOL

Location: Surrounded by hills and about 10 villages, Sumavanam Village School is situated near a town called Madanapalli in Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh.

Philosophy: The school is based on the teaching methodologies of David Horsburgh of Rishi Valley.

What is different? It is possible to make poor and undernourished children appreciate the beauty of science and, at the same time, see the dangers posed by technology. Would a happy and interesting school atmosphere arrest the dropout rate?

At Sumavanam, the staff has discovered that children can learn even under very adverse conditions. There appears to be an in-built desire to learn, but to do so, one requires an atmosphere free from fear. Very often, the fear may be due to an insensitive authority in the school. It is, therefore, necessary that there be a friendly relationship between the teacher and pupils. Other forms of fear include the fear of failing or the fear of under achievement. This is taken care of at Sumavanam, by having each child learn at his/her own pace. Therefore, no artificial divisions like Classes I, II, III and so on exist. David Horsburgh insisted on three points:

1. In Nature, you never find species (animals or plants) segregated by age. The young and old all grow and learn together.
2. It is very important for teachers to constantly remind themselves that they are merely facilitators of the children's learning process. Hence, there should be no hierarchical distinction between students and teachers.

3. A child's pace of learning should be followed. Accordingly, Sumavanam never uses a standard textbook for an entire group of children or expects them all to learn at the same pace.

Thus, vertical grouping is followed amongst the 20 children of Sumavanam, where the older children assist the younger ones. Progressively graded textbooks and workbooks are used for different subjects. A child who is very good in math may have completed Book V, but may still be working on Book II in English. Once they complete Book VI in all subjects, the children are considered ready for Class VI—which is the first stage at which students in Sumavanam are classified.

Language is taught by first showing children real objects that they can see and feel, and then showing the same objects progressively as wooden cutouts, 2D pictures and finally, words. This way, they are gradually led to the concept of abstract representation of objects and hence do not find it intimidating.

'Most children who come to school are craving love and attention,' says one of the two co-founders of the school. 'Only when we have established a relationship of mutual affection do lessons and learning follow.' Small wonder, then, that children at Sumavanam, on the whole, use no bad language, have very few fights amongst themselves, are punctual and take care of their things. They rarely tell lies and do not copy answers from others.

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E-mail: Not available

Website: www.alternativeeducationindia.net/sumavanam.htm
www.ashanet.org/projects/document-view.php?id=1513

RISHI VALLEY EDUCATION CENTRE

Location: In a sheltered valley in an atmosphere of peace and serenity, in the interior of rural Andhra Pradesh, Chittoor District.

Philosophy: The ideas of freedom, love of nature, concern for mankind and a global outlook lie at the core of J. Krishnamurti's

(the founder's) philosophy. Students and teachers should relate as equals because they share a common nature and face common problems, which they have to jointly understand. The school authorities hope that students passing out from Rishi Valley School would grow into self-aware, sensitive and responsible human beings, who remain lifelong learners.

What is different? Set amidst picturesque rocky terrain, there is a pulsating dynamism to the awesome silence in this school campus. It is difficult not to look inward, when one stays in this campus even if only for a few days.

Students at Rishi Valley School learn in multiple ways: through whole class participation, group learning, films, debates and library research; there is a strong emphasis on developing the senses and learning directly from nature.

The Rishi Valley School provides a distinctive educational environment that enables young persons to grow not only in intellectual capacities, but also in other dimensions of their being. It has a well-developed fine arts section, and a sports department, which offers a range of activities and regular coaching. The emphasis is towards an in-depth preparation of students to meet the academic requirements of the prescribed syllabi. While developing the students' intellectual faculties, there is a conscious effort towards creating a wider awareness of the world and giving space for the development of the aesthetic, moral and emotional dimensions.

The dormitories, which are for about 20 students each (the younger students live in vertical age groupings), are managed by resident house parents/teachers who oversee the children's physical and emotional needs. With a teacher-student ratio of 1:9, it is no wonder that the students here get a lot of individual attention.

There are no annual examinations until the end of Class IX. Unit tests, however, are conducted throughout the year. Assessment criteria include projects, assignments, classroom presentations—testing an array of abilities, rather than just memory. Every grade has a weekly culture class where students discuss a variety of contemporary issues. Sessions are held to learn self-understanding and to appreciate the value of silence. Special work materials have been created in the area of science, mathematics and the humanities. Class XI has a General Studies Programme, where students work

outside the classroom: with the Health Centre, at the *Rural Education Centre (REC)*, in the villages, in the school kitchen.

The REC has a free day school, a teacher-training programme for rural youth and a small rural dispensary. The REC also runs satellite schools; each is a 'one-teacher-one-class' school of about 30 students, vertically grouped, situated in small hamlets around the valley and run by teachers trained at the REC.

Environment regeneration schemes have transformed this corner of the drought-prone Chittoor district into a green zone. Students from the Rishi Valley School and the REC undertake tree planting every monsoon.

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Website: www.kfionline.org/2_rishivalley_ec.asp

SLOKA, THE STEINER SCHOOL

Location: Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh

Philosophy: The school was launched by a group of people (teachers and concerned parents) who wanted to spark-off change and who shared a dream about their children. Their aim was to start a school that had sensitivity and a deeper understanding of the child. The Steiner Waldorf School seemed to be the answer. Anthroposophy—the knowledge of the human being—is the basis of Steiner education.

What is different? A school like Sloka stands apart because parents at Sloka also undertake a new commitment when the child comes to school—that they truly want this wonder-filled and child-centred learning for their children—a commitment they have to honour.

This school, the first of its kind in India, exemplifies the spirit of the Steiner education philosophy. Steiner education is multi-dimensional, appealing to all the faculties. For the young child, it is 'all' that matters, rather than exceptional proficiency in one

aspect. It is applicable to each child, irrespective of her/his cultural roots, language, religious beliefs or geographical origin.

The founders of the school wanted to help develop complete rounded personalities, whose special gifts are nourished from a fuller source. Diversity of backgrounds at Sloka is its hallmark. Since English is the medium of instruction at Sloka, it is a critical task to keep in mind the importance of the mother tongue, to encourage its use as a form of self-expression and the experience of language cannot be limited to the intellect alone, but needs to be an expression of one's whole being—body, soul and spirit.

The teachers' group is very aware of the cultural task they have undertaken for educating children, and their enthusiasm in teaching is communicated to their students.

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Website: www.slokawaldorf.com

LAKSHYA (PART OF BLOOMING BUDS SCHOOL)

Location: An inconspicuous building with a lotus flower and a veena embedded on its wall in Balaji Nagar colony in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

Philosophy: In the words of Aurobindo, 'To love to learn is the most precious gift that one can make to a child.'

What is different? Each classroom has a 'season's table' which is a simple (but breathtaking) decoration of the day's syllabus in the class.

A novel way of teaching prime numbers to Class II—a game of treasure hunt!

The lotus flower and veena on the school wall symbolise purity and simplicity; very apt for a school whose focus is on children between the ages of 4 and 6 years. Most of these children come from middle-income groups.

Lakshya started in 2001. Today, it has about 100 children who look forward to attending this school. Apart from learning the

3 Rs, they love swinging from the jungle gym or sliding down the slippery slide.

The school has kindergarten and nursery classes. Each class has a teacher–child ratio of 1:20. The classrooms are simple, well ventilated and artistically decorated with toys and fresh flowers. There is a sandpit and a play area which is dotted with lush green foliage. The children have access to a well-stocked library. All these create an ideal atmosphere to make school a fun place to learn.

The school has designed its own textbooks, using lively songs and rhymes. English is the medium of instruction, while Telugu and Hindi are taught as well.

The Waldorf system¹ is followed. Creative activity is not merely doodling, but that which aids the child's development of motor skills and reasoning. Regular puppet shows and field trips are organised to widen the child's horizons. Concepts are not *given* to the children, but are *arrived at* by them after some hands-on experience.

Rahul is a seven-year-old boy whose parents believed in giving him harsh punishments. He became withdrawn and would crush insects in his anger. Over the years, teachers gently counselled him to be kind to helpless beings. Recently, when he went to the circus, he saw animals being treated cruelly. He went to the authorities to protest against the cruelty! He regained his confidence and developed compassion for helpless creatures.

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Website: Not available

VIDYARANYA HIGH SCHOOL

Location: Vidyaranya School is located at the bottom of a small hill overlooked by the Birla Temple in Hyderabad.

Philosophy: The central idea of Vidyaranya School is that education, to be 'education', must create good individuals—for it is only good individuals who can bring about a good world. Vidyaranya does not believe in the utterly formal aspects of education.

What is different? In this school, 'freedom' is the key word. The students are encouraged to explore and understand their world.

They are encouraged to ask questions, to seek and find their own answers, and to think independently.

Here is one of the few schools in the country which for years now, does not require its students to wear uniforms. The issue of what clothes to wear or not was discussed frequently and openly before any decision was taken.

Though the students take the ICSE examination at the end of Class X, unit tests and exams are not conducted until the students reach Class VIII. The emphasis is on learning and not on testing or on 'clearing the exam'. The teachers here experiment with different forms of teaching and it is one of the few schools that has come up with innovative ways to hone the value system of children.

The main characteristics of the school are an emphasis on the individuality and uniqueness of each child, a complete lack of competition and rankings, and an open mind to try out different methods of teaching.

The school's atmosphere is conducive to growth and learning. There are very few restrictions imposed on the students, as the school believes in trusting them to be responsible individuals.

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ABHAYA SCHOOL

Location: Surrounded by a tree-studded compound with old mango and badaam trees in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

Philosophy: 'Child, lend me your hand that I may walk in the light of your trust in me.' These words perhaps best capture the essence of Abhaya School, a school that follows the Waldorf Curriculum¹, best described by the simple truth: there is no need to stimulate children—life is enough stimulation for them.

What is different? In one of the dream-sharing sessions of teachers, one teacher expressed her deep desire to have trees around! Bingo, in the midst of the din and pollution of the city is this little

island—the central court adorned by an ancient *badaam* tree—you may see little hands picking fallen badaams, looking for stones to break them open and sharing them with everyone around. Added to this is the joy of picking tender mangoes—seven- or eight-year olds saying, ‘Is it mango season already?’ and dreaming of the ripe golden mangoes that will soon invade their lives. In this day and time of computers and Barbie dolls, here is a school that does not think much of them as means of education or entertainment...

The school was founded and is run by Sarwam Educational Society. The administrative stronghold of the school is its board comprising Sarwam, parents and teachers. In the true spirit of a Waldorf school, this triangle places, within its decision-making process, the interests of the children at Abhaya.

Abhaya School works with the indications regarding child development given by Rudolph Steiner, a German philosopher. Children’s development in Abhaya is viewed from many perspectives; the primary one being the seven-year cycles of growth.

The first seven-year cycle: The Kindergarten years are primarily years where the physical growth of the child is the focus. Kindergartens have nothing loud about them—no jarring colours, no loud-voiced teachers—everything around soothes their senses. It is believed that a teacher going about her tasks like a mother is sufficient for a child to imitate and play. Play is taken seriously and although no formal learning is done in those years, a lot of real learning takes place at subliminal levels. Children experience the richness of language through stories, songs, verses; experience the big cosmic cycles of seasons through their senses; learn fundamentals of math through rhythmic movement, and natural sequences that occur through simple daily chores. They actively experience the need for reverence towards the world around them. *Reverence* in the first seven years transforms into *wonder* at the world in the second phase.

The second seven-year cycle: This is the time when formal learning begins and children are in grade classes. Though a group of teachers works with every class, each class is accompanied during all those years (ideally) by one class teacher working with as many subjects as s/he can. The child is a whole being, and knowledge is a whole experience. Hence, to have one teacher bringing the wholeness of knowledge is one of the many reasons behind this.

The child learns out of the deep love and respect s/he feels for the teachers. Learning is done through very many artistic activities and this helps children to learn imaginatively.

The third seven-year cycle: This is known as the stormy adolescence, and this is when they begin to work with teachers who are specialists. At this stage, love for teachers transforms into respect. This is one school that aims to meet the challenges of adolescence with patience, tact and an enlivening lesson! Reverence and wonder pave the way for real thinking and learning to judge and reflect.

Presently, Abhaya has classes up to Class VIII and plans to move up to Class X, following the ICSE curriculum from Classes VII to X.

The teachers undergo continuous training with an in-house training programme. Annual training sessions are also held at Khandala and at Hyderabad every January. These annual events give an exposure to the worldwide Waldorf impulse. The teachers assess their needs from time to time and plan out trainings accordingly. It calls for individuals who are passionate and can give that extra time to unlearn and learn!

Usually, subjects are worked upon intensively for a period of one month and...dropped. Dropped? Yes, one month of math and the next month perhaps English. But won't children forget? Yes, they will and should. Remembering cannot occur without forgetting. The ability to remember is an equally creative activity—born out of an inner perception.

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CENTRE FOR LEARNING (CFL)

Location: Centre for Learning (CFL) is in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh, which is now on the international business map, subsequent to the information technology revolution.

Philosophy: CFL is a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation that strives to understand, in theoretical and practical terms, what (quality) education means, as distinct from schooling, and to discover how to educate without schooling. It also seeks to demonstrate how

education can empower individuals and disadvantaged groups, rather than alienate or domesticate them, and make them unwitting collaborators in their own exploitation.

What is different? What happens when a group of people, with first hand experience in urban and rural India, begins to share their deep concern about the sterility, futility and pointlessness of 'educational' institutions? Education at these institutions, the group opines, is no longer personally fulfilling or even socially relevant...a school like the CFL is then born.

CFL began in 1982 as a criticism of formal schools. Slowly, the realisation dawned that first schooling was defined in terms of education, but now education is understood to only mean schooling. Now, the Centre has as its aims the following:

- To discover how learning can be made personally meaningful and socially responsible.
- To discover how education can lead to self-determined, self-disciplined and self-realising members of society.
- To support individuals to address the problems of modern-day living—critically, creatively and compassionately.
- To share the realisation that schooling is not education.

CFL also recognises that there is an overt and covert, witting and unwitting, anti-poor bias of the whole 'education' system. The board members of CFL feel that the cure for this does not lie in cosmetic changes. The attempt has to be made to move out of the framework of schooling to education and to correct the anti-poor bias of the 'education' system.

CFL assumes relevance in view of the fact that the government policy makers are yet to come out (in the view of many) with a satisfactory national policy of education, and are yet to extend equal educational opportunities to the socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Activities include curriculum development, development of teaching/learning materials and teacher-training. The education wing believes in inclusive education. It admits a small percentage of children, who are labelled 'dropouts'—emotionally disturbed children and children with learning or

behavioural problems—and supports their attempts to join the mainstream as creative, responsible individuals. The predetermined school syllabus is used as a means to realise individual potential and competence, and not as an end in itself. The mode of functioning is non-formal, but despite the flexibility, there is no compromise on quality. The attempt is to help people discover their individuality, learn skills, increase competence and learn to be self-determined, self-realising individuals as well as responsible members of society.

In the twin cities of Secunderabad–Hyderabad, urbanites are excited by their rapid development into an IT hub, a Genome Valley and a major tourism centre. At CFL, however, the focus is on the sizeable community that has little or no access to education, health and other basic facilities like water, housing and toilets. In a state where a large number of farmers commit suicide because they are unable to feed their families and pay off debts, and which has the dubious distinction of being the place where children (particularly girls) are sold to pay off debts, CFL works with both ends of the economic spectrum and all bands in between.

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DIKSHA—A WALDORF SCHOOL

Location: In the cantonment area of Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

Philosophy: A child's development must be carefully and lovingly guided, if he or she is to become a truly productive human being.

What is different? No tests! Assessments are made by only observing the child.

Diksha started in 2000 with 23 children. Today, there are about 120 children clamouring into their classrooms. Following the Waldorf system of learning, the child is given the space to evolve on his/her own in a congenial atmosphere. The classrooms are

spacious and the children are happy to visit their well-equipped library. Apart from the 3 Rs, they are taught music on the flute and keyboard, painting, gardening, farming, house building, knitting and sewing.

Tests or examinations merely test one's memory power and not knowledge. From Nursery to Class V, evaluations are made not on the basis of marks, but by careful observation of each child. Teachers spend time to put into practice such an unusual method of assessment.

Diksha is a growing school with one class being added every year. Even though the classrooms are spacious, they find the playground is rather small and plan to move to a bigger place. At Diksha, teaching is based on a child's feelings that come from experiences. For example, if a child is asked to add 3 and 2, he or she will be asked: 'Your mother gave you three kisses on one cheek and your father gave two on the other cheek. How many kisses did your parents give you?'

Address: Plot No. 9, AP Text Book Colony, Karkhana, Secunderabad 500009,

Andhra Pradesh

Telephone: +91-40-55295926

Fax: Not available

E-mail: dikshaschool@rediffmail.com

Website: Not available

ANAND NIKETAN

Location: The school is located in the heart of Nasik in a commercial complex, Vasant Market, nearly 1.5 km away from the central bus station.

Philosophy: Meaningful and joyful education is the basis of Anand Niketan's working philosophy.

What is different? Students of Class V are preparing to go out. Garbage management is one of the lessons in science. Instead of sitting in class and reading about this topic from a book, they are on their way to study the logistics of garbage management from 'Nirmal Gram Nirman Kendra', Gangapur. This organisation deals with garbage management. Watching their textbooks come alive,

the children learn to categorise and separate the wet and dry garbage, and are even taught how to construct low-cost toilets.

Anand Niketan was started in 1998 by a group of motivated young persons from Nasik, who were dissatisfied with the current system of education that is bookish, elitist and examination-oriented. Inspired by educational philosophers and alternative schools in Maharashtra, the group decided to start a school that would practise child-centred, socially relevant and creative education.

It is managed by a non-profit organisation, Avishkar Shikshan Sanstha.

Anand Niketan was started with 15 children and a single class. At present, there are about 175 children. They have classes from LKG to Class VIII. The student–teacher ratio is 8:1 with about 20–25 children in each class. The medium of instruction in the school is Marathi, while special efforts are made to expose children to Hindi as well as English from an early age.

The school follows the prescribed curriculum of the Maharashtra State Board while introducing experiential learning, project method and self-study to ensure better grasp of basic concepts and also interconnections between subjects. Along with the study of textbooks, study tours, the use of reference material, conducting experiments, interaction with artists, scientists and citizens are all built into the school curriculum. Children are encouraged to think outside the box, go behind—and beyond—the obvious.

Students have access to well-equipped science laboratories. The library, which houses a number of volumes of interest, is open and free to students as well as parents.

Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities are given a lot of attention. Every student participates in sports and cultural activities. Various artists, like sculptors and painters, are invited every month to demonstrate their art before children.

Against the backdrop of unavailability of jobs in the organised sector, and with the intention of preventing their students from becoming frustrated job seekers, Anand Niketan imparts *enterprise education* or entrepreneurship development from the beginning. Children are made to recognise their potential to convert available resources into products or services, for profitable economic exchange.

Refresher courses are organised for teachers—to acquaint them of the latest teaching methods, to make the learning process joyful, meaningful and to equip them with skills to deal with children of different abilities.

Empty classroom? Class II is learning, nevertheless! Students are going out into the surroundings to learn about the environment. They have already seen bushes, shrubs and flowers. Now they are watching, with concentration, the slab casting of a nearby building under construction—amid the noises that accompany such a job.

Address: Krishnakalpa, P and T Colony, Nasik 422005, Maharashtra

Telephone: +91-253-2312640

Fax: Not available

E-mail: avishkar_nsk@rediffmail.com

Website: www.anandniketan.ac.in

SHREYAS FOUNDATION

Location: On a beautiful hill covering 28 acres of wooded land, sheltering wild birds and animals and dotted with farms.

Philosophy: Development in children of initiative, resourcefulness and adaptability to situations faced in everyday life.

What is different? Children do not have to pass through closed corridors, but should be able to walk on paths and walkways, through courtyards, under the open sky and trees.

For over five decades, Shreyas has been known for its progressive and creative ideas in the education of children, regardless of gender or socio-economic background. 'Shreyas' is a Sanskrit word meaning blessed, welfare, well-being, felicity and beatitude.

This school was begun by some mothers and educators in 1947, in the wake of India's Independence. Since then, Shreyas has grown into a full-fledged multi-lingual day and residential centre. It has classes from Nursery to VII.

Children are grouped according to their age. There are not more than 25 to 30 children to one adult. The children come from a wide range of backgrounds—some without family support and a home.

There are no uniforms, textbooks, examinations, rewards or punishments. Emphasis is not on competition, but on putting in

one's best efforts, in fun and play and not in winning. Learning by rote is not encouraged. Drama is used as a unique medium of learning, using open-air techniques and shadow play. Learning about the environment is done by observing nature—in the deer and botanical parks and a museum. Children are exposed to Gujarati, Hindi and English.

The classrooms or activity rooms are spacious, well ventilated and well lit with mobile furniture. Children attend special subject rooms for music, dancing, art and craft and social and natural sciences. Besides this, there is a gymnasium, an audiovisual room, a well-equipped library and an amphitheatre.

From early morning till late evening, the hill buzzes with the children's activities like yoga, karate, swimming, drama, painting, sculpture, dancing, music and art. Besides these activities, there are festivals and recitals in the three open-air theatres and the hall.

Each child's self-evaluation and progress are under continuous observation and detailed reports are kept.

Besides a school, Shreyas has a home for destitute children: Balgram SOS. This home ensures that children are brought up in a home environment. There are many cottages and each is managed by a 'mother' who raises a family of about 10 destitute children as her own, giving them love and hope for a bright future.

Shreyas was the first school in India to introduce puppetry as far back as 1955 and was influenced by Maria Montessori.

Address: Near Shreyas Railway Crossing, Ambawadi, Ahmedabad 380015, Gujarat

Telephone: +91-79-26601338, 26601378, 26601588

Fax: Not available

E-mail: Not available

Website: Not available

THE RIVERSIDE SCHOOL

Location: The Riverside School is located on the banks of the Sabarmati river, Ahmedabad, surrounded by a lot of greenery.

Philosophy: Riverside believes that a school is a natural extension of the home, and that the child's well-being and progress are a collective responsibility. The school's intention is to provide its students with education of the highest quality and not compromise

on primary education, as this will form the foundation of their development and competence for the rest of their lives.

What is different? You may see this picture here, which is not very common in many schools—children huddled together to make a tortoise. Once the tortoise is made, the children observe the tortoise and explore it, even comparing it to themselves. The teacher facilitates the learning process by asking the children questions like: ‘Why does a tortoise have a shell?’, ‘What do you think it eats?’

Riverside believes in providing inputs to children, in an environment that integrates individual as well as group learning and playing, knowledge and values, reasoning and creativity, discipline and freedom into a seamless mix of experiences, discoveries and structured inputs.

Riverside works in three stages:

1. Key stage 1 houses grades Pre K–grade 2: The emphasis here is exploration and building of strength.
2. Key stage 2 houses grades 3–7: Here, the focus shifts to application of skills through authentic expression.
3. Key stage 3 comprises grades 8–12: At this level, the children focus on personal goal-setting and self-actualisation.

The school’s curriculum planning programme has as its three cornerstones: teaching for understanding, multiple intelligence and making learning visible. Language, numeracy and reasoning are the building blocks of learning, and subsequently all other forms of knowledge and skills evolve from these three core areas.

Involving the parents and the community in good practices helps in increasing Riverside’s circle of influence. Investing in them through regularly conducted workshops for the teaching fraternity helps them stay in touch with the newest trends and practices in education.

Address: 307, next to Army CSD Depot, Airport Road, Ahmedabad 380003, Gujarat

Telephone: +91-79-22861321

Fax: Not available

E-mail: kirans@icenet.net

Website: www.schoolriverside.com

ANANYA SHIKSHANA KENDRA

Location: Ananya is located at Carmelram, off Bangalore's Sarjapur Road in the middle of a coconut grove. There is a mysterious feeling of excitement in the air. With the leaves on the coconut trees rustling softly and the wind blowing gently, the campus feels open and free.

Philosophy: Ananya believes in providing educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged children who have been rejected by mainstream schools. It also works towards creating a cadre of people who are sensitive to, and can respond to, the needs of underprivileged children.

What is different? It is a surprisingly quiet school campus. There are classes in tents and sheds, and when you walk into one of them, you realise why the place is so quiet—children are thoroughly absorbed in learning on their own!

Ananya means unique, one of its kind. Started by Dr Shashi Rao, Ananya provides a unique learning space for underprivileged children. Here, children sit around the teacher in informal arrangements as they write their own play, or examine geometric shapes to find out their volume...and since many teachers and children stay on campus, there are many opportunities to learn.

There are no formal standards and levels. Children learn in mixed age groups. The youngest child is 7 years old, while the eldest is 22. Learning takes place through study materials, which are arranged by levels of difficulty and are placed within easy reach of the children. The teachers encourage participation from each and every child, and this is made easier with the teacher–student ratio of 1:8. With a total of 58 students and 7 teachers, Ananya holds parent–teacher meetings three times a year. These meetings help bridge the gap between the home and the school environment.

ASK and ACT are two important prongs of Ananya's programme: ASK (Ananya Shikshana Kendra) is the school, in which a spirit of questioning is inculcated in the children. ACT (Ananya Centre for Teachers) is a platform where teachers and individuals exchange views, share experiences of mutual concern and are motivated to act. Here, training programmes are also held for teachers in service, right through the year, once or twice a month.

Thus, the teachers in training are able to implement some of the ideas that they get during the training sessions, and come back to discuss them with their trainer. Ananya thus tries to spread the fragrance of its uniqueness as far and wide as possible.

'Thank you for listening to us,' says a child in perfect English, 'do come again.' Who would not, we wonder, as we leave, awestruck by the gentleness and friendliness of the learning ambience here.

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Fax: Not available

E-mail: shashi_ananya@hotmail.com

Website: www.ananyatrust.org

GEAR INNOVATIVE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL (GIIS)

Location: Located on Gear Road in Bangalore. Gear Road is the arch road that connects the Outer Ring Road (Devarabisenahalli) and Sarjapur Road (Doddakannhalli), about 1.5 km from both the roads.

Philosophy: The vision is to build the future by meeting the educational needs of *today* with the traditional wisdom of *yesterday* and the technology of *tomorrow*. The school believes that utilising the concept of individualised learning and differentiated curriculum and by implementing the concept of 'multilevel content, but uniform level achievement', students do not just get by, they get ahead in all aspects of learning.

What is different? Education at GIIS is hands-on, activity-oriented and these activities are designed with various aspects of Intel-ligences and Gifted Education like the Multiple Intelligences in mind.

This school is considered to be a catalytic centre for education activities and hence involvement of parents and the community in general is quite welcome and expected. There is a research-based rationale for each of these activities being designed the way it is being done.

At Gear, the focus is on multiple levels and multiple styles of learning. Lessons are planned in the framework of Multiple Intel-ligences; they are student-specific and mainly hands-on and project-oriented.

Teachers work through the child's strong points to tackle the challenging areas. For example, every child in Gear enjoys math. There are a lot more of Gifted Education principles and strategies employed to make learning fun.

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Telephone: +91-80-28440917, 28440919

Fax: +91-80-28440917, 28440919

E-mail: gear@vsnl.com

Website: www.gear-ed-village.in

BHAVYA

Location: Bhavya is set around an open courtyard and is located near Kodigehalli Circle, Bangalore.

Philosophy: Bhavya is a learning cooperative that seeks to be deeply nurturing and empathetic to everything within it—children, adults and the environment. At Bhavya, life is an education and learning is an essential and inherent outcome of living and growing.

What is different? What sets the educational programme at Bhavya apart is its focus on the emotional development of the child as a primary precursor to other skills that develop. An emotionally secure child is a confident and empathetic child who can face many odds—addition, fractions, trigonometry, language, emotional conflicts and all life's challenges—with a positive and assertive attitude.

The adults in Bhavya are specially careful that they do not interfere with the child's natural learning process through constant teaching. The non-graded programme adopted at Bhavya permits a multi-age organisation of learning groups. This makes it possible to personalise education in a natural setting, where children are not forced to take on learning tasks for which they are not ready. The underlying belief is that trying to force children to do something—anything—before they are willing to comprehend it and make a decision for themselves, is like trying to crack open the cocoon before the butterfly has had time to complete its metamorphosis. In stead of a child who is sensitive and confident

of the decisions s/he makes, you have a crippled butterfly, which does not have the ability and confidence to fly.

Bhavya does not look for trained teachers. Instead, it conducts its own training programme. The child–adult ratio is 6:1. Several parents also volunteer time and money towards the programme.

Bhavya is firm in not wanting to be affiliated to any Board, as that will bind them in precisely the way in which they refuse to be bound. However, Bhavya helps the children prepare for an examination that they wish to take. Bhavya has a strong academic programme, the success of which is based on the respect given to each individual child, his/her unique interest, and his/her pace of learning and growing. This enables children to take responsibility for their own learning and once that happens all else falls in place.

The staff at Bhavya work hard to prepare material for the children to use. The main emphasis while developing the material is that the children should be able to learn by themselves with minimal adult intervention. When they need any help, they are guided to the appropriate resources, which the children learn to explore in a manner which will provide them with the answers they seek.

Bhavya has been created by individuals with a strong belief in the need for humanising childhood and education. Bhavya seeks to resist the serious threat posed to the normal development of children by the stultifying view of childhood and education widely prevalent today.

Address: Plot No. 50–51, Thindlu Main Road, Near Kodigehalli Railway Station, Virupakshpura, Bangalore 560097, Karnataka

Telephone: +91-80-3096 6215, 5768 6168, 55470510, 098454 04153.

Fax: Not available

E-mail: bhavyafreedom@gmail.com

Website: www.alternativeeducationindia.net/Bhavya.htm

NAMMA SHAALE

Location: Nestled amidst green trees on the outskirts of Bangalore on Hennur–Bagalur Road.

Philosophy: Namma Shaale lives up to the tradition of Maria Montessori and is constantly guided by the child, in whose service it strives.

What is different? Children are seen deeply absorbed in the learning aid that is before them: whether it is a beautiful timeline of history, a board with counters to be placed upon it or a set of coloured cards. Learning is taking place quietly and with deep enjoyment. The noise and chatter that is characteristic of a typical school is conspicuously absent here.

Namma Shaale has created an environment keeping in mind the needs of the child, through all the child's developmental phases. Children in mixed age groups (from 2½ to 15 years of age) choose their work from among self-correcting materials, displayed on open shelves, and work in specific areas. Over a period of time, the children develop into a normalised community, working with a high degree of concentration and few interruptions. This process occurs through repeated work with materials that captivate the child's attention.

The primary environment's function is to provide children with an early and general foundation that includes a positive attitude towards school, inner security, a sense of order, and pride in the physical environment. It also fosters abiding curiosity, a habit of concentration, initiative and persistence, the ability to make decisions, self-discipline, a sense of responsibility toward other members of the class, school and community and, above all, a joy of learning.

The elementary programme offers a continuum built on the primary experience. Adolescents have an earning centre, in addition to the learning centre, where they make beautifully crafted bags amongst other items, and sell them to parents and local people for a certain amount. This gives them an opportunity to experience the power of purchase, saving and being responsible for money. Thus, studies are integrated here not only in terms of subject matter, but in terms of moral learning as well. Work is divided into two aspects: the practical work emanating from the farm, store, and community work; and the educational studies connecting farm experiences to independent studies that fit into a general academic syllabus.

Decisions like not having to wear a uniform evolved after discussion amongst students, parents and children.

Children here are free to interact with each other and learn at their own pace. There is no hurry, and plenty of enjoyment. Why

else would the adolescent children come in even on Saturdays and plan out their weekly schedule themselves?

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Karnataka

Telephone: +91-80-56968621

Fax: Not available

E-mail: nammashaale@yahoo.com

Website: Not available

PRAKRIYA GREEN WISDOM SCHOOL

Location: Prakriya School is located in a warm, creative and invigorating school-space linked to neighbouring villages in Bangalore, Karnataka, with the building design influenced by the organic need for community.

Philosophy: Prakriya—‘the green wisdom school’—was envisioned as a school that seriously respects the wisdom of Nature within ourselves as well as in our environment. Prakriya is anchored by a group of people who believe that education in schools must have its setting in a community of concerned, warm and enthusiastic people.

What is different? For tomorrow’s world, children need not only skills and knowledge, but also healthy dispositions of learning and relating to each other. For teachers at Prakriya, nurturing children in a way that helps them develop roots and wings is not their ‘work’ alone—but a way of life that is enlivening and meaningful to themselves.

Prakriya is a school that believes in creative ways to help each child learn and shine in his/her own way and also ensure rigorous building of skills and knowledge. Prakriya teachers are fully convinced that the only way this would be possible is to move away from factory style, standardised teaching and be uncompromising about two parameters in education:

- Have small classes of only 15 children.
- Foster enthusiasm, excitement and close relationships between teachers and children.

Prakriya teachers also feel that learning by experience is at least as important as learning from books or teachers. So there are several field trips in the year and children also get exposed to interesting role models and resource people. Such exposure to new people and events triggers children's interest in learning new skills and also helps them make their own discoveries and connections.

'Learning to learn is a process that is thus encouraged effortlessly at Prakriya School.'

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Fax: Not available

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Website: www.prakriyaschool.org

BRINDAVAN EDUCATION TRUST

Location: A house which lies in the heart of Bangalore city in Karnataka.

Philosophy: All students are equal. If they cannot learn the way you teach, can you teach the way they learn?

What is different? Parents who opt to volunteer at the resource room will teach not their own, but other children and provide a much needed support to the special educator. It is the combination of personal experience with technical knowledge that makes parents quick to identify the difficulties the child is facing, utilise problem-solving approaches, and apply fine grained evaluation of progress.

Brindavan is a service organisation which started in 1993, with the objective of bringing children with special needs into mainstream society. The concern was to increase the academic gains of a child with learning disabilities, within the school setting.

Since a residential building is being used, a relaxed and homely atmosphere pervades each room, where a teacher can be seen with a small group of children. At present, there are about 50 children in the school. The student-teacher ratio is 8:1.

The five-day week begins at 9.30 a.m. and ends at 2.30 p.m. Remedial sessions take place from 3.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m. The

school is affiliated to the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), where children can appear for one or two subjects per exam. At the time of writing this book, six to seven children were hoping to complete the remaining subjects in the Class X examinations.

Students are divided into five levels after which they can appear for the NIOS examination; Levels One and Two are for children aged 9–11, Level Three for 11–12 year olds, Level Four for 12–13 years and Level Five for those whose average age is 15 years.

The school has a special room which is referred to as the 'resource room'. The resource room provides individual teaching programmes to children assessed as having learning disabilities (dyslexia). Any such child misses one period a day to attend the remedial session. Optimally, the remedial teacher works with two to three children at a time. The programme is not subject based, but skill based. Learning is done through flashcards of key words in each concept, flow charts, mind maps, picture books at all levels, easy reading books, word games, spelling games, math teaching aids, summaries of chapters, among many others. Subject-based learning is not the immediate goal. In fact, the remedial programme should spill over into the subjects, eventually; if the child is taught to read two syllable words, the skills should generalise to words from anywhere: be it a storybook, English or science text. However, the remedial session is not to be confused with tuition.

The most significant benefits are that the child does not drop out of school, the educational needs of the child are met with and the child's self-esteem remains intact. Above all, peer acceptance and mutual coexistence become a way of life. Children see each person as a combination of strengths as well as weaknesses.

Every child has an individual educational programme for the year. This document states the abilities of the child, his/her strengths and weaknesses, as well as the goals that will be achieved by attending the remedial session.

Parents are counselled by a professional, as most do not understand that their children are basically normal, but only need to be taught differently. Teachers at Brindavan do the course in special education at Karnataka Parents Association² for Mentally Retarded Children, which helps them in working with special children. Brindavan also interacts with other schools to:

- conduct awareness programmes and general assessments;
- conduct workshops for teachers interested in helping dyslexic children with learning;
- set up resource centres at mainstream and schools and train those teachers; and
- hold case conferences to establish networking within Bangalore;

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Website: Not available

POORNA LEARNING CENTRE

Location: An unobtrusive gate opens into a large open ground, off the Kodigehalli Main Road in Bangalore, Karnataka. Characteristically, there is no board to announce the presence of this exploration into what education means.

Philosophy: Poorna Learning Centre aims at developing intellectual ability, values of compassion, humility, respect for each other, (respect for) the earth, joyfulness and quest for excellence in whatever children do. Simply put, Poorna aspires to educate children so that they develop academic skills and emotional well-being, thus becoming caring members of society.

What is different? Some parents expressed the feeling that mainstream schooling was not giving their children what they needed. They felt that learning that did not go beyond reading, writing and stuffing the children with mindless facts, did not help them build a relationship with Nature. And thus, Poorna Learning Centre was born!

In Poorna Learning Centre, the simple classrooms (Poorna was started in a garage!) speak quietly of the emphasis on the essentials. Like the student who took us around and pointed out the various species of trees and plants on campus, the ambience here invites you to look more carefully at the simple things around you.

The attempt here is to return to the basics, to create an education where children can explore and begin to understand the world around them, and learn in a meaningful way. Such education is not linked purely to material gain. The stress is on self-learning, with the child working at his/her own pace. There is not much imposition through curriculum, timetables and so on. These are decided by sitting together and discussing what works and what does not. The child receives unconditional acceptance.

Poorna tries to bring learning closer to the life of a child. It is ensured that the child has a fair degree of control over what s/he wishes to learn. It is also ensured that the learning needs of every child are understood by the teacher.

Children work in small groups of 10–15. Communication skills are enhanced through free interactions, free writing and reading. The emphasis is on conceptual clarity and rote learning is minimised. Learning of science is seen as an experiential process. Creative activities are part of school and not considered extra curricular. The school prepares the children for the National Open School examination or the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), but since they do not believe in just training kids to pass the examination, they do not feel bound by the syllabus. Much time and thought goes into conflict resolution. The aim is to resolve conflict with as little violence as possible.

As an effort that was initiated by dissatisfied parents, Poorna is an eye opener on what is truly essential for making a difference in the field of education: no huge buildings, no swimming pools to boast of. Surely these students will value completely different things from the teenagers of today!

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Telephone: +91-80-23620364

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Website: www.ashanet.org/conferences/lni/poorna_learning.htm

SILVER QUEEN PUBLIC SCHOOL

Location: A slide and jungle gym adorn the yard of this house that has been converted into a school, situated right opposite the railway line of Sahakar Nagar, Bangalore.

Philosophy: The name of the school typifies its philosophy: Belli meaning 'silver' and Rani, meaning 'queen': Silver Queen sees the positive aspects in every child—based on the saying, 'Every cloud has a silver lining'. Children with learning disabilities and 'normal' children study together here. This is the simple but important philosophy of the school: to develop compassion and accept others, however different.

What is different? 'Ma'am, another poetry class? How boring!' moaned the students. Smilingly, the teacher took them outdoors. 'Now, come on, sing!' She commanded. 'Film songs?' they asked mischievously. 'Sure, why not?' was their teacher's surprising answer. And the class had a roaring time singing song after song with their teacher. After a while, she asked them if they now felt like opening their poetry books. There were resigned sighs. Allright, she said, just give me a few minutes. And quickly, she set the poem to a tune...then sang it before the class! Together, they tried tune after tune until they chose a popular tune and then sang the poem to that tune...within 10 minutes, the entire class had memorised the poem...!

This school recognises that every child is talented and depends entirely on the stimulus provided to them at school and home. Building confidence and self-esteem is what this school is focussed on for every child, which they hope the child is equipped with when s/he leaves this school to join another. That, and their emphasis on including specially abled children with 'normal' children ensures that the latter think about (and feel for) the differently abled from a very early age.

Silver Queen is recognised by the government of Karnataka and follows the ICSE and CBSE syllabus. The classes go from lower kindergarten to Class IV. Apart from different mental and emotional backgrounds, children come from poor families (like masons) and from middle to higher income groups. This encourages the children to have compassion and integrate with each other and accept

others who are different: physically, mentally and economically. Although the school does not receive any financial aid, fee concessions are given to those who cannot afford the school fees.

This school has realised the importance of examinations that each child will have to inevitably face, when s/he goes to another school. But, they do not want the children to be burdened by the kind of examinations which can daunt young minds and discourage mental and emotional growth. So examinations at Silver Queen are tailor-made to be student-friendly assessments that are graded—no marks are given. The assessment is merely a platform on which a child's confidence is built with an 'I, too, can do it' attitude. Knowing how children hate to write, the assessments are heavily weighted towards oral assessment for the first three years, and only slowly tilt towards assessing writing skills. (Interestingly, every teacher has to undergo a course in Cursive Writing when they join this school. This is because the school recognises that children naturally write as their teacher does.) If a child takes ill or is in a hospital, objective questions are given so that the child is not left behind in academics. Thus, the assessment methodology and format keep touching base, as it were, with the child's need to be empowered by the whole process, and not, as is most often the case, have the examination cripple the child with a permanent blow to his/her self-esteem.

The school's Annual Day is eagerly looked forward to by parents, teachers and of course, the children. Here is a school where 'bright' and 'talented' children are not given programme after programme to participate in, while milder kids are completely sidelined. Silver Queen believes that every child is brilliant, in some way or the other. On Independence Day, the teachers wrote out long speeches in English, Hindi and Kannada, that were broken up into parts. Each and every child was given a part to memorise according to her/his ability. The shy or new children are usually encouraged to go on stage first. 'It is very difficult even for adults to be the first speaker, and so we encourage the newest child to take up this challenge'. When a spastic child cried because she could not participate in dance, she was asked, 'Why do you feel bad because you have not been asked to dance? There is something you do better than anyone else!' What is that, asked the child with a tear-stained face. 'Why, you are such a fabulous singer!' she was told, and the child was given a long *sloka* (prayer) to learn. Even the child's mother

expressed doubt that her child could do it, but the mother was quietly led away from the scene. Later, a teacher successfully taught the child to sing the same *sloka* before the entire school.

Is it a wonder that, eventually, these children shed their stage fear completely?

Like the poems that they set tunes to, Silver Queen has succeeded in setting examinations to a certain tune as well: so much so that almost all the children in each class win merit certificates, something the school had set aside as being awarded only to the one who did best in each subject. Very quickly, every child scored the highest in most subjects, so the school was left with no option, but to give them all merit certificates! Somewhere, between the extremes of schools that drill children only to excel in examinations, and those that completely ignore the reality of tests and exams, this school seems to be coming close to achieving the perfect harmony...or shall we say, being in tune with reality, without tensions!

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Fax: Not available

E-mail: Not available

Website: Not available

THE VALLEY SCHOOL (KFI)

Location: The school is located in Bangalore, Karnataka, in a picturesque valley with undulating hills and farms with a reserve forest on the fringe. It extends over 115 acres of land.

Philosophy: At the Valley School, the approach towards learning is heuristic in nature, aimed at self-learning and self-discovery. They believe in creating an atmosphere that is free from authority, without reward and punishment, and address intelligence through learning without comparison and competition. It provides structure in an ambience of space and leisure to enable students to embark on a journey of self-discovery.

What is different? The school has been successful in implementing a 'Vertical Age Group Programme,' where classes are organised in clusters of about 12–15 children in ages varying from 7–10. To

a large extent, the children work independently and the role of the adult in the classroom is to act as a facilitator rather than as the sole repository of knowledge and skills. This also facilitates other avenues of learning and does not restrict the learning process to an exclusive teacher-centred process.

The school is in the process of expanding this process, in the current academic year, to include children of age groups 11–12 into this process. This is being done by clustering the children into age group 7–9 and age group 10–12. In effect, children who conventionally would have been placed in Classes II to VII would now work in two mixed age group clusters.

The ISC programme for Classes XI and XII has also undergone a change with a greater emphasis being placed on self-learning. The programmes are now being made dependent on the child's abilities, and children are encouraged to work at their pace taking longer time whenever necessary.

The school also places a great emphasis on arts and traditional crafts with children of every age spending significant time every week in the 'Art Village,' a designated area within the sprawling campus. In addition to painting, design, craft, weaving, pottery, and woodwork, the curriculum now includes a dance and music (vocal and percussion) programme.

To enrich the resource base of teachers, a Teacher Resource Centre has also been set up. It will also facilitate teacher orientation programmes and refresher courses. A Post-School Programme in various disciplines is offered for students who would be interested in pursuing independent study with a focus on self-inquiry.

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VIKASANA SCHOOL

Location: Tucked away from the city's bustle, off Kanakapura Road, on the outskirts of Bangalore, Karnataka, is this serene school housed in a rural setting.

Philosophy: It provides holistic and quality education with the emphasis on self-learning. The basic philosophy is that anyone at any level can learn what one is interested in. There is no competition or comparison—a child can learn at her/his own pace.

What is different? Nestled amongst a grove of trees are little single-room cottages built by the students and staff. A dome shaped building is the fruit of their explorations into what local scientists had designed as an economical and space-saving structure.

Education means learning—and the process can be enjoyable. This opportunity should be given to children who have no access to system education, like village children. Thus emerged 'Vikasana': it means blossoming, opening up and spreading.

Vikasana was started under the inspiration of David Horsburgh's philosophy of learning. The founder recalls how, when she first went to David Horsburgh, she was awed by Telugu children singing Kannada songs beautifully: how on earth were they taught Kannada, she asked, by those who *themselves did not know the language*? David Horsburgh pointed out that the teacher was merely a facilitator, and did not have to know the subject that was being taught.

Children at Vikasana learn by doing and through participation in activities. The child's learning is facilitated and then allowed to proceed at its own pace without fear. There is total freedom to take time, to explore, decipher and learn. The children learn to read and write three languages.

Handicrafts are not only taught as a subject, but are integrated into their daily lives. Vikasana believes that materials have their own laws. Through handling them, a physical-mental harmony develops (you may call it discipline). A child begins to apply himself/herself to the task with total interest and involvement. An aesthetic sense develops, the heart and head coordinate, and the mind stops wandering. Calmness develops at that time of doing without words.

The emphasis has always been on self-sufficiency. It is hands-on work that gives the students confidence in the things that they have learnt. This centre serves as a resource centre for non-formal education.

Under Horsburgh's guidance, the founder of Vikasana feels she learnt so much, only a very small fraction of which she has managed to impart to her students of even 10 years' standing!

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Website: www.alternativeeducationindia.net/vikasana_school.htm

SAMEEKSHA

Location: A double-storeyed home in Vivekanandanagar, in Bangalore, Karnataka. Instead of a signboard, the happy voices of the children on the balcony announce its existence.

Philosophy: Everybody has a weakness, but we must build on the strengths of a child, not dwell on the weakness.

What is different? When a student was asked, 'What does Sameeksha mean to you?' he replied, 'Learning in Sameeksha is not necessarily with books. There is a different side to learning. All the children here come with some kind of problem, and being with them, I can now understand them.' Whose words are these? A boy who had earlier been in a mainstream school and found it difficult to cope there. Today, Sameeksha is preparing him to take the NIOS XII examination in a few months' time!

This school started in 1999, as a resource centre in the evenings for children who could not cope with the pressures in mainstream schools. Sameeksha began as an after-school resource centre, where four such children were helped every evening. Pretty soon, these children found a great mismatch between what was being attempted with them in the resource centre, in the evenings, and what was expected of them in their regular school the next day. It was then that Sameeksha turned into a school.

In Sameeksha, children who come from varied family backgrounds (some with mental or physical disabilities) work, laugh and study together. Integration of children with differences of any kind (some obvious and others not) with 'normal' children has brought out feelings of compassion and consideration for the other person. Competition is absent in the school.

There are seven classes, going right up to Classes X and XII. Each class has no more than 4–5 children. At present, there are 13 teachers who share a deep compassion for marginalised children. The

school prepares the children for the National Open School Examination, which they take from a registered NIOS Centre nearby.

'Examinations' is merely a word for teachers and students. The assessment depends on the teachers' judgement of whether or not the student has grasped the concept. No student is failed. The teachers have developed their own curriculum until Class IX (This is an eye opener to those who feel restricted and bound by syllabi, Boards and curricula!). An innovation on the anvil is the use of only three books by each child, starting June. Teachers have worked to develop 20 modules, in each of the following subjects: Math, English and EVS–History–Geography. Each module is in a spiral bound book, and has in it both worksheets as well as text material. No child is expected to complete the entire module, which carries extra worksheets that a child needs to do only if s/he feels up to doing. Teachers assess each child and decide which module to give him/her. As a child completes one module in about eight weeks, s/he goes on to the next module thereafter.

Sameeksha showcases all that is possible by people with a large heart overflowing with compassion. The so-called 'weaker' children nurture normal ambitions like any other child, and above all, feel loved and accepted for just being themselves. Its founder, Mary Selvaraj, runs the school with her heart—she encourages her staff to take a day off during the week (though the school works from Monday to Friday) to be with the family or attend to household chores. This school runs like one big family, supporting each other at all times.

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Website: Not available

SITA SCHOOL, SOCIETY FOR EDUCATIONAL EXPLORATION

Location: The school is located on the outskirts of North Bangalore in Silvepura, surrounded by lush greenery.

Philosophy: The main aim of the school is to provide quality education (using a child-centred approach) to rural children and empower them to express their full potential.

What is different? You could very easily miss this school, nestled as it is in a rural section on the outskirts of Bangalore. Set amidst groves of trees, the inviting cottages and artistic surroundings force you to stop and drink in the quiet beauty of the place.

The Sita School is a small, non-formal school that provides creative and purposeful education. It caters to children who have been marginalised by mainstream schooling for a variety of reasons. It has 56 students from nearby villages ranging in age from 5–14 years. Owing to the wide range in age and ability, the school has a flexible structure in order to accommodate the individual needs of each child.

Learning is largely based on the child's environment and experience and not on any standardised texts. A number of practical activities are encouraged including stitching, clay work, printing and gardening. Creative expression through art and drama forms an important part of the children's learning. The school also has a small screen-printing workshop that enables its students to contribute towards their own needs.

English textbooks have been developed from the school's own experience of what works best, by the founder, Jane Sahi. There are plans to bring out more such books.

Noticeable in the atmosphere is a sense of relaxation. In the absence of the tension of running the rat race, how can these children but flower?

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CENTRE FOR LEARNING (CFL)

Location: Situated on the northeast of the granite mountain, Savandurga, in Bangalore, Karnataka, the land is characterised by small fields and undulating terrain scattered with ancient granite boulders.

Philosophy: The central challenge of education, for CFL, is the awakening of a non-divisive awareness that typifies true learning and enquiry. As an educator, CFL wishes to meet the challenge of creating an environment where children and adults can enquire together in freedom, security and affection.

What is different? CFL was started by a group interested in the educational philosophy of J. Krishnamurti. As a community of teachers, parents and children, they are concerned with learning. 'This learning,' they say, 'involves not only academics and other life skills, but also a deeper learning about ourselves, our relationships and the way we respond to the challenges of life.'

Education has been reduced to preparing the young to compete in the world. Conventionally, education is taken to involve the learning of skills and the accumulation of knowledge. CFL believes that true education, in its widest sense, needs to go far beyond this. The educator and the student are part of this inward journey that is not dependent on any dogma or authority.

The curriculum also aims to help the students discover their interest and nurture rigorous academic skills. Facilities at the campus are simple and cost-effective. As a group of adults, CFL works cooperatively, without hierarchy or formal structure. The school tries to help the student discover interests and livelihood possibilities that are not merely a reflection of current values and trends in society. This demands a clarity from teachers and parents that does not succumb to anxiety about the future. Parents, right from the start, are invited to take an active role in the school and the dialogues that are part of it.

The educational programme at CFL endeavours to create an environment that nurtures a capacity for enquiry. Dialogue is a central feature of the life in the school. The student is encouraged

to question issues in the classroom and in the larger domain of the relationships at home and school.

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DEENA BANDHU SCHOOL

Location: In Chamarajanagar, which is the southern-most town of Karnataka and on the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala states.

Philosophy: Child-centred education through respecting the individual identity of the child.

What is different? The age-old belief that a class has four walls has no relevance here. Around the quadrangle, five-walled classrooms are built in a special way. The walls in the classroom are adorned with colourfully drawn pictures that make the children happy the moment they enter their classroom. Apart from decorating the walls, these pictures are meant to help the children in the learning process.

Deena Bandhu was started as an orphanage for children in 1992. Since then, its vision has been to develop confidence in children who have had a difficult childhood—orphans, those destitute and estranged. Professor Jaydev, with the help of philanthropists, has provided a home and an education for these children.

The school, which started in 1998, aims at providing good value-based education up to high school. It encourages children to pursue higher education or a vocational training in their area of interest. Today, its vision has grown to achieve overall development of the community by involving mothers of children in the learning process through self-help groups.

This is a free school that does not collect any fees since it caters to children from very poor families. At present, over 250 boys and girls attend Deena Bandhu School. Some of them come from the orphanage, while the others come from their homes nearby. There are classes from I to VII.

The prescribed state syllabus is followed. However, within the limits of the same syllabus, activity-based teaching and opportunity

for self-learning are provided. The community is involved by inviting professionals to share their experiences with the children. The school also acts as a catalyst in bringing about the required changes in the attitude of the community people with regard to hygiene and sanitation. This is done by staging street plays and presentations by the children.

A typical day begins with activities during an assembly. A story is narrated by a teacher or a child and its moral is displayed on posters that are put up on the walls. During this assembly, experiments are conducted. For example, the properties of water are demonstrated; on each day, one property of water is demonstrated to the children.

Learning is done through activity. For example, children can see how the roots of a plant turn in response to gravity, and can understand the change of seasons. Most of these presentations are done by children. During the learning process at Deena Bandhu, emphasis is not so much on the content taught and assimilated, but on what happens to the child during the process of learning. The main question is whether this process of learning can empower the child and give him/her confidence.

Children are taught through the play-way method. Kannada is taught using activity-based methods. Emphasis is on imparting knowledge to these children using low-cost materials that are locally available.

On Saturdays, after regular classes, vocational training is held for children who attend Classes VI and VII. These life-oriented courses are on nutrition, simple food-storage technology, sericulture, dairy farming and basic hygiene and sanitation.

Future plans of Deena Bandhu include developing a science resource centre for teachers and investing in building capacities of the teachers.

A classic example of self-help: the students grow 50 per cent of their own vegetables, and maintain a cow from which they sell any surplus milk. Several boys from this programme have gone to college.

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BALA BALAGA CREATIVE EDUCATION TRUST

Location: A compound dotted with trees with a cowdung floored open area and an open-air stage in Dharwad district, known as the cultural capital of Karnataka.

Philosophy: Their aim is twofold:

1. To provide a homely and fear-free atmosphere to explore various possibilities and ways of learning.
2. To guide the children to be socially responsible citizens with a passion to excel in whatever they choose to do.

What is different? *All the world's a stage...and we are but children...* On Parent's Day, parents enthusiastically participate in different programmes. The event is usually planned for a full moon night. The celebrations end with a potluck dinner, where food is brought by everybody and shared. The grandparents are the most enthusiastic during this event.

Bala Balaga was started with three children in 1996, by Rajani, who is a theatre personality. She wanted to experiment with the idea of teaching through theatre and thus making learning fun. Since then, the school has grown to be a significant space for cultural events and radical innovations in education. She explains: 'I found education was separated from life. It was purely academic spoon-feeding, lacking social responsibility...I thought theatre would be a good medium for education. After all, children love the world of stories, drama and make believe. Children grasp things immediately when events are dramatised.'

Rajani's colleague, Pratibha works with her teachers as a team. The teachers are here because they *love to teach*. Some of them are full-time volunteers. They believe in the natural and creative methods evolved by Rajani, Pratibha and her team, among whom is a strong bonding. All teachers are called 'maushi' (meaning 'aunty') or mama (meaning 'uncle'). The teacher is not seen as an outsider forcing children to learn, but as an endearing and approachable adult.

Today, the school has 160 pupils from nursery to Class VII. It has a low teacher-student ratio of about 1:12. The medium of instruction is Kannada with English introduced from Class I. The

curriculum is based on the syllabus prescribed by the state government as a broad guideline. The curriculum is revised every summer, based on the teacher's experiences in the classrooms during the previous academic year.

Books are used for technical aspects of learning, like grammar and for exercises in math. The curriculum is planned weekwise and copies are given in advance to the parents. This ensures that parents are involved all the way and that everyone (parents, teachers and children) is aware of all the events in the school. Home assignments are designed to encourage parent-child activity.

The children are not under compulsion to wear uniforms or footwear to school. As far as possible, the children study outdoors, in the open, rather than within confined indoor areas. So, they came up with a blend of outdoor free learning complemented with a fair amount of theatre. Theatre teaches them about puppetry, drama, music, song, languages, costume-making and time management. There is a sandpit and a small swimming pool which otherwise doubles-up as an open-air classroom under trees.

The teachers use media such as song, theatre, drama, clay work and Nature study to introduce concepts and content. Reading and writing enter the curriculum later. Instead of the latter, there is play, singing, story-telling. Story time finds most of the children on the laps of their maushis. The atmosphere is homely and pleasant. (These children are so affectionate and devoid of shyness that during an annual school gathering, one of them sat on the chief guest's lap!)

Interestingly, children are often given extra time to complete their examinations. The teacher corrects the answer paper and sits with the child and goes through the paper to see how s/he has fared. They are given extra learning sessions with teachers whenever difficulties are encountered.

The day for preschoolers starts from 9.30 a.m. and ends at 1.30 p.m. and older children stay on till 4.30 p.m. Children are encouraged to bring nutritious home-cooked snacks or lunch.

Two of the outer walls of the low houses that serve as classrooms, are painted black, so they may double up as black boards. The school is painted with ethnic motifs. Once a year, the parents, teachers and children together paint the school with natural colours and dyes.

In order to inculcate simplicity and eco-friendliness, every Saturday is observed as Khadi Day and all the teachers and children come in khadi clothes. Even during summer vacations, the school is never closed; children come from other places to stay with their relatives in Dharwad so they also participate in the theatre workshops for children.

Since the school is growing, plans are afoot to purchase a 3-acre area close to Karnataka University. This area is on one side of a valley and it is going to be a challenge to design appropriate buildings.

One of the teachers reminisces: 'I joined Bala Balaga last year because I wished to share in my daughter's learning process. There is no arrogance in these children. They listen with curiosity and since the ambience is of familiarity and freedom, they have openness to the world.'

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JYOTHY ENGLISH MEDIUM SCHOOL

Location: Jyothy School is part of an agricultural and business district. Close to a small town, Chintamani in Kolar District, which is one and a half hours from Rishi Valley and two hours from Bangalore, this school is located in a completely rural setting.

Philosophy: The school's ultimate aim is to make the world a better place. It believes that every child is clever and can be helped to reach his/her potential and contribute positively to society.

What is different? Here is a school where the goals are set every year by each child, individually, with the class teacher—in music, karate, academics, dance and general reading. The goals are reviewed every term, so competitiveness is not an issue, as the children are always asked only about their own goals. A three-day orientation is given to each child at the beginning of school, and goal-setting and sharing of the school's mission statement is done at this time.

Here, the basic tenets of pedagogy, the WHY of the methodology is shared with the children, for example, why are we using De Bono's methods³? Why are we using mind mapping? and so on. A variety of learning resources are used—

- De Bono³ mind-mapping: results of research on memory.
- Meta Thinking⁴: Stephen Covey, *Seven Habits of Successful People*.

Thinking skills are introduced from Class IV to X. Mind-mapping is done from Class I. Children draw beautiful mind maps.

Academics take up only three hours a day, one and a half hours for each of English and Math (from Classes I to X). While English and math run throughout the year, other subjects are taken at a pace of only two a term, and are not repeated in that year. In those one and a half hours, at least 8 to 10 methodologies (audiovisual, mind mapping, group work, reading, visualisation, use of thinking skills, and so on) are used in the classroom interaction, as also a variety of group formations (small group, large group and so on). The entire afternoon session is devoted to music, dance, karate and games.

A set format of classroom interactions is followed by the teachers and no deviation is allowed from this. The founder ensures continuity through this format, regardless of teacher turnover.

Teachers teach a maximum of seven lessons (one and a half hours) a week. They have to submit lesson plans and do not anchor activities, for which other part-time teachers also come in. As a consequence of their involvement in key areas, children are very mobilised and need very little monitoring by the teachers.

A Six Thinking Hat Review of all school functions occurs. The Class X programme starts in June and ends in October and all the projects are done in December. Alpha meditation is taught and done every day. Children seem to value that. The Principal, Father Varkey, is the anchoring force behind this school, which has 380 students and 28 teachers, of whom about 14 are for academics and 14 are for activities.

A school where students suggest changes to the principal? Yes, students here give feedback on what worked and what did not

work to the principal, through their class diary. He has to take action on their suggestions! The students plan revision and execute it by themselves in Class X. They understand through their own orientation why they are doing what they are.

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THE POORNA PRAGNYA LEARNING CENTRE

Location: Better known as Tarakka's school, it is tucked away in a small village called Alanahalli in Mysore, Karnataka, surrounded by coconut, mango and neem trees, planted by the children themselves.

Philosophy: The Poorna Pragnya School has been especially created to not only address the pitfalls in the conventional education system, but also to ensure that children from poor socio-economic backgrounds are not deprived of the opportunity for high-quality education. The name Poorna Pragnya signifies all round development.

What is different? Learning takes place gradually and naturally in this environment. A lot of importance is given to self-learning. The teachers are just guides, in a school which follows its own syllabus. If there are any mistakes, then the teacher helps in clarifying the child's doubts.

The school gives a high degree of importance to self-development and individual skills. It stresses on good teacher-child relationships. Children are mostly from rural families, with just a few who (though from urban, middle-class backgrounds) did not for some reason fit into the mainstream schools.

The centre tries to give children what they like to learn, while ensuring joyful methods of teaching in subjects including music, dancing, pottery and gardening. It holds a variety of cultural programmes and conducts trips outside the school. Development of fine motor skills was given importance in the beginning years. The

school does not pressurise the child to immediately learn reading or writing sentences.

Creativity is encouraged and music is given a great deal of importance. The regular government syllabus is introduced only when the student is mentally prepared. Even then, the subjects are treated as simple stories.

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Website: www.learningnet-india.org/lni/data/groups/alted/poornapragmaya/index.php

THE CHOICE SCHOOL

Location: Spread across a sprawling campus on the outskirts of Cochin, Kerala, the school building looks appealing with colourful and vibrant artwork on the walls—all designed to capture the impressionable minds of young children.

Philosophy: The institution's motto is: 'A school has to have a soul, a character, and an identity.' The major objective of the Choice school is to promote, support and encourage socially beneficial causes related to education, health, culture and sport.

What is different? Education is neither confined to the pages of a book nor to the four walls of a classroom. The rustling of leaves, chirping of birds and dewdrops on the grass are as important as the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

The Choice School wants to equip children for life in its fullness; moulding them into complete and competent human beings. The school believes in a holistic approach. The child is given every opportunity to excel in academics, sports and extra-curricular activities. To empower the child is to 'empower the future citizen'. There is no dearth of enthusiasm or optimism for great things to come, believes this school. Every child is allowed to have the opportunity of indulging in activities that cater to her/his individual talents and inclinations.

As the twig is bent, so the tree is inclined. The Choice School believes that correct values inculcated in childhood ensure the building of a generation with well-balanced values. Hence, value-based education for life is the aim of the Choice Primary.

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SRI ATMANANDA MEMORIAL SCHOOL

Location: This school nestles a little away from the highway in Malakkara, Kerala, and has two campuses, about 2 km apart.

Philosophy: Central to this school's approach to children is the acknowledgement of the individual child. Everyone has the need to feel that they are seen and heard. This school believes that any individual functions best in situations when this happens. The school's approach to children puts this acknowledgement at the centre.

What is different? 'It is raining in the Punjab!' shouts a child as he squirts water from a hosepipe onto the state, on a colourful map of India spread across the floor of the spacious courtyard! In the Lower Primary section, eight-year-olds thrash out their own problems in a panchayat, where they take their own decisions on how to resolve conflicts.

In this school, the child knows he is heard and understood and feels unconditionally valued. Development of all the child's faculties, feel Atmananda's management, occurs at the fullest when the child is truly acknowledged.

Atmananda is committed to disseminating what they term the 'KPM⁵ Approach to Children'—to teachers, parents, policy makers and organisations—so that it can help children of all backgrounds to develop into happy and confident adults. It develops the skills, qualities and syllabus knowledge that the children will need to prepare them for successful university studies and beyond.

The relationship between teacher and child is at the heart of the KPM approach. When a teacher responds to a child in such a way

that the child believes that the teacher accepts the validity of his way of seeing things, a relationship of trust and confidence is established between them. The teacher values the child unconditionally, and treats the child with unfailing regard for his/her feelings and opinions.

The curriculum in the school is introduced through the child's interests so that learning is fun and meaningful. The teachers are trained to go 'beyond the syllabus.' They concentrate on three major areas:

- Personal development
- Social development
- Academic development

The teachers assess the children in these three areas, through written child reports conducted on a weekly basis, and more formal annual term reports. The parents have a particularly important role to play in supporting the child's education in the school.

In this learning environment, the child gains self-confidence, and is free to develop all facets. As cognitive skills grow, the child also learns to regard the feelings of others, and to make decisions and solve problems. Sri Atmananda Memorial School has demonstrated that schools can meet the child's most basic needs, and by so doing, can support the development of the whole child. Here, the teacher-student ratio is also kept as low as 1:15.

The High School has a number of projects for the students, which help tie together the diverse fields of learning. They simultaneously learn, for instance, about revolutions in history (the Nationalist Movement in India) along with volcanic eruptions and tsunamis in geography, and poetry and literature of revolutionaries in literature.

The KPM approach to children has spread to America and France as well, with the establishment of KPM Institute and KPM Education in those countries, respectively. In addition, a Sri Atmananda Memorial School has been established in the US, and plans for the establishment of another school are underway in France (See www.kpmapproach.org for more details).

What happens if a boy refuses to read or write until he is in Class VI? At Sri Atmananda Memorial School, such a boy was read

to by his teachers, who cleverly tapped his passion for dinosaurs when he reached Class VI. 'Can you pass-on to others all that you know about dinosaurs?' the teacher asked him one day, 'by writing a book on them?' Hesitant at first, he began by referring to various sources and then there was nothing stopping him: he learnt to read and write in three months flat!

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THE GURUKUL

Location: Dotted with rubber trees and occasional rock formations, the layout of The Gurukul in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, is dictated by its contours and location.

Philosophy: The primary objective of The Gurukul is to educate, develop and prepare all their pupils for life in the 'global village'. The school's goal is to provide stress-free, holistic learning through a well-rounded curriculum, to create high self-esteem in the students and encourage them, without undue pressure, to strive for excellence and development of their full potential. Through their educational system, they also want to challenge students to work out the focus and direction of their lives in preparation for life after school.

What is different? The unique aspect of The Gurukul is how the programmes are delivered. All students are encouraged to analyse, discuss, explore, question and use information from other available resources.

Rote learning is discouraged and students do not have to rewrite what has already been written. It must be made clear that students learn more and make learning a lifelong skill when they are having fun and are active participants in their learning. This is very much encouraged at The Gurukul. The environment in the school is conducive to helping teachers and students relate to each other without fear and pressure. The emphasis is on imparting

learning skills and not on mere acquisition of knowledge. The student is encouraged to think independently, observe nature and environment and relate to it rightly and with sensitivity. Parents and children are encouraged to give suggestions that will improve the quality of the school.

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KANAVU

Location: In the hills near Mananthavadi in Wayanad, Kerala.

Philosophy: Tribal students should learn to appreciate and celebrate their rich tribal heritage, and rise above the oppression and marginalisation that tribals face.

What is different? Kanavu means dream in Malayalam and this school has been described as 'a school for dreamers'. It encourages tribal children to dare to dream and chase after it.

Kanavu is dominated by tribals belonging to the Naikka and Paniya tribes of Wayanad. They faced a bleak future with no way out of poverty. Most of the parents of the children at Kanavu are daily-wage labourers who work on the pepper and cardamom plantations and remain jobless for the better part of the year.

But when K.J. Baby started this school 13 years ago, they began to think otherwise. Today, there are about 80 children, most of them tribals, who are part of Kanavu. Teachers and students live together in the *gurukulam* or commune tradition. The children cook and clean their living spaces, while their parents live in their own homes in the hills nearby.

The emphasis is on the all-round development of a child rather than mere book knowledge. Children are divided into groups according to their age and mental capabilities. The day begins with rigorous practice of *Kalaripayattu* (a form of martial arts) and ends with a long session of music and dance before dinner. There is also a walk in the forest in the early evening and a bath

in the stream before the evening session. All the children spend time in the fields; they work in the kitchen and learn tailoring skills. Elders from the tribes teach them traditional handicrafts, pottery, painting and making articles from bamboo. Here, the child's sense of belonging and identity is stressed.

Many being first-generation learners, they study through practical examples—animal and plant life is observed and studied. Students learn a subject in which they are interested or relate to and teach it to the others. Every day, for one and a half hours, older children teach at least six new concepts to a younger child. Older students are encouraged to prepare for the open school examinations when they are ready. No compulsions are imposed.

Poets, writers, educationists and musicians from within and outside Kerala visit Kanavu from time to time, stay with the children and teach their skills to them.

Children of tribals are encouraged to showcase their heritage in many ways. In another experiment in learning, Kanavu has a regular student exchange programme with Poorna Learning Centre in Bangalore. These children from Kanavu, aged between 12 and 18 years, demonstrate and impart their skills like Kalaripayattu to their peers in Poorna. In Bangalore, they are taught English, math and other basic subjects.

Wayanad's tribal languages and folklore have found new life through K.J. Baby's efforts. The children of Kanavu are natural musicians; they pick up songs and art forms with ease. The music also serves as a means to collect donations for the school. Indeed, the Kanavu troupe travels all over Kerala singing songs composed and set to music by the children themselves. The songs are lyrical tales about their lives, their loves, their pain and their laughter.

With Leela passionately playing the tabla, the rest of the troupe breaks into song—it is a song about their home, their land, Wayanad. They describe the rich earth, the breeze, gurgling rivers and the forests that teem with animals and birds. They sing about the symbiotic relationship of the tribals with nature. And it is more evocative than any lecture on ecology could ever be!

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PAZHASSI RAJA TRIBAL VIDYALAYA

Location: Situated on four acres of land surrounded by three mist-covered mountains (reserve forest) in Wayanad district in Kerala.

Philosophy: 'A new dimension to tribal development'. Simply put, to improve the future of the tribals by bringing them into the mainstream of society through education.

What is different? Learning at home which is also a school? Teacher and students live together. This is a true Gurukula school...

Amidst the lush greenery in Wayanad, a narrow path winds its way to Pazhassi Raja Tribal Vidyalaya, which was started in 1996 by the Vanavasi Ashram Trust. This school was focussed on bringing education to the children of poor tribals like Paniya, Kattu Nayikar, Adiyar, Kuruma, Oorali and Kurichias, who had no access to education. The trust, which runs the school, consists of three tribal chieftains, a retired university professor, a medical practitioner, a lady social worker and a retired school teacher. There are 15 teachers (including a four vocational instructors) and 14 non-teaching staff members working in the school and hostels.

At present, there are over 300 children studying in the school, most of whom are first-generation learners whose parents are agricultural labourers. The students are divided into several study groups. Each group, under the supervision of a teacher, is responsible for their daily activities. The school follows the state syllabus and is affiliated to the Open School System. Classes go on up to Class X. The medium of instruction is the regional language, Malayalam; but English is taught from Class I. Each tribal group has its own dialect.

The system of education is *Gurukula*, where the students and teachers live together and share their experiences as in a family. The students, teachers and parents work together to grow paddy, vegetables, tapioca, banana and pulses.

A typical day starts at 5.30 a.m. with a prayer and ends by 9.30 p.m. Classroom instruction starts at 8.00 a.m. and ends at 1.00 p.m. From 2.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m., vocational training classes for carpentry, agriculture, stitching and tailoring, computer training, and so on, are held for children of Classes V to X. Besides these, skills like book-binding, basket making, mat making and clay modelling are also taught. There are instructors for each vocation.

To maintain a connection with their culture, *kolkali* (a tribal dance) and archery are taught. Archery competitions are held for men, women and children every year. The entire school lives close to Nature, literally. Water is brought from the mountain streams; on the roof of these school buildings there are solar panels installed to capture large amounts of sunlight that they get in this area. As the school is in a remote forest area, power failure is a regular phenomenon. During such times the stored solar energy is used for their power supply. It is useful for non-electrified buildings also. Two of the classrooms are small round-shaped semi-permanent buildings with thatched roofs facing the Reserve Forest constructed on pillars, specifically for the very young children as they can enjoy their natural surroundings while studying. This school has a science laboratory and library as well as specially designed classrooms for stitching and tailoring, computer training and carpentry.

Over the years, the school has faced many obstacles, one of them being the lack of funds. There were 521 tribal children studying here four years ago and that number reduced gradually because the trust could not afford their expenses. Undeterred, the children were encouraged to attend the school. Even today, a large number of tribal children do not attend school. As there are no medical facilities available, the trust started a hospital here two years ago. But it was closed after six months, as no doctor was willing to come over to this remote forest area to practise.

In spite of the many hurdles, the school has brought a positive change in the attitude of tribals towards education and health care.

On a poignant note, a visitor asked a little girl years ago what she wanted to do in the future. She answered that she wanted to train as a teacher and return to educate other children in the same school. Today, this girl has appeared for senior secondary examination and is awaiting the result.

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TRIDHA RUDOLF STEINER SCHOOL

Location: Tridha is situated in the Mumbai suburb of Vile Parle, 20 minutes away from Juhu Beach. Though surrounded by concrete buildings, Tridha has endeavoured to make life different for children within the school premises.

Philosophy: Tridha is a social initiative by parents who wanted learning to be a stress-free and soul-enriching experience for their children. Tridha—the threefold—has been chosen to convey the focus on the three aspects of the being: *Head* (thinking), *Heart* (feeling) and *Hands* (will or action).

What is different? The curriculum at Tridha is artistically structured to nourish the whole child—in head, heart and limbs. The child's innate sense of wonder and fantasy is kept alive and thereby the child gains a heightened interest in the surrounding world.

Tridha has chosen Rudolf Steiner's method of teaching where the curriculum is designed on the basis of a deep understanding of the child's nature. It provides an environment that recognises and meets the varied needs of the developing child in today's society. Teachers creatively nurture the joy and the wonder of learning and cultivate the child's deepening awareness of relationships with others and with the world. So, a solid educational foundation is created for the development of responsible human beings, that imparts direction and responsibility to their lives with clarity of thought, sensitivity of feeling and strength of will.

Founded in the year 2000 with just one class, Tridha has reached Class VI at the time of collection of data for this compilation. The plan is to add one class each year, going up to Class X, when the school will be affiliated to the ICSE Board. Children have no exams till Class VII and homework begins only from Class IV. The ICSE Board requires a mandatory syllabus from Class VIII onwards which will be adhered to, keeping in mind Steiner's creative methodology.

Here is a school that is managed by a core group of teachers called the College of Teachers. While the financial and legal responsibility rests in the hands of the Indian Education Revival

Trust, the school brings in a flavour of difference in its management by teachers.

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ANAND NIKETAN

Location: Anand Niketan is situated in the Gandhi Ashram at Sewagram, which is 7 km from Wardha, Maharashtra. It is on the north-south and east-west railway route.

Philosophy: Anand Niketan draws inspiration from Gandhiji's ideas on *New Education*. It aims to bring about the holistic development of a child, that is, head, heart and body.

- It also aims for the development of responsible citizenship.
- The development of intellect with compassion, humility and respect for all life forms and for Mother Earth is considered important.
- It believes that education has a transformative role in society, a transformation towards a fair and sustainable world.

Overall, the objective of education is *to get ready for life* and so the learning process must be integrated with everyday life.

What is different? The teachers perform manual tasks with the same gusto as that of the children.

Anand Niketan started as a collective effort of like-minded people who wanted to make education identifiable with practical experiences. The children who attend Anand Niketan come from Sewagram village. Most of them are first-generation learners, from families who have migrated from different villages in search of work.

The school started in July 2005 out of dissatisfaction with the existing education system that encourages rote learning. It started with 80 students, grouped according to their age:

- Shishoo group: 2–3 years
- Bal group: 4–5 years
- Classes I and II: 6–7 years

The teacher–student ratio is 1:15. The curriculum for preschool children is based on the principles of *Purva Buniyadi* (that is developed on Gandhiji's ideas of education). It applies the educational ideas of Montessori and Froebel to an Indian context. For children above six years, teachers follow a combination of the state curriculum and *Nai Taleem*⁶ curriculum, where the emphasis is on experiential learning.

At Anand Niketan, the medium of instruction is Marathi. Learning takes place at the individual level and the freedom of the child to work at his/her own pace is respected. Thus, there is no comparison and no ranking. At the same time, taking responsibility for one's own learning to become intellectually, physically and emotionally self-reliant is encouraged. It is seen to that the child learns many skills required for day-to-day life. Carefully graded educational material is made available. Home activities relevant to daily life are given to children at the preschool level.

Teachers and children take up the responsibility of cleaning the classrooms, the playground and the toilets. Children participate in weekly cooking activities and eat together. These simple, yet powerful, activities inculcate a spirit of togetherness and cooperation among these children.

Children are encouraged to express themselves through art forms. The study of plant and animal life is done through gardening and caring for animals in the school's vicinity. These activities are integrated with other subjects.

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THE PRAGAT SHIKSHAN SANSTHA'S KAMALA NIMBKAR BALBHAVAN

Location: In Phaltan, about 300 km from Mumbai and 100 km from Pune.

Philosophy: The school is built on the conviction that:

- It should have a free and happy atmosphere with a limited class size.
- It should have children from all walks of life. There should be a concerted effort made to bring in 'Backward Class' children.
- The medium of instruction should be Marathi, but as the importance of English cannot be denied, English should be taught from Class I.
- Innovative, child-centred, activity-based methods should be used.
- Environment awareness should be included.
- The school should be secular.
- The school should become a resource centre for other schools, especially government schools.

What is different? Twenty years ago, a four-year-old girl refused to go to school after only two days of experience in a kindergarten. To convince her that school need not be such a terrible place, Dr Maxine Berntsen decided to have a kindergarten in her backyard—for a month. Maxine Berntsen, or Maxine *maushi*, used to pick up children from 'untouchable' families and 'lower castes' and dropouts from underprivileged backgrounds. That is how Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan (KNB) was started.

The school building is an old seed warehouse converted into classrooms. KNB is surrounded with shady trees, which makes it possible to hold classes outdoors. In front of the building is an open-air stage, a jungle gym and poles for *mallakhamb* (or gymnast's pole) and rope *mallakhamb*. Besides a well-stocked library, children have access to 15 computers for their project work. This is not just a school but also a resource centre.

KNB is a full-time Marathi medium school with classes from kindergarten to Class X (SSC). The number of students per class is limited to about 35 in the primary classes. The secondary school generally does not have more than 27 students in a class. The number of girls and boys is roughly equal. The various 'backward classes' represent 50 per cent of the total student population.

Some students have serious learning problems, particularly in math and English. The school has taken advantage of the concession made available by the SSC Board for dyscalculia⁷ children. They can choose to drop algebra and geometry and take arithmetic of Class VII, along with one vocational subject. The children are also given the option of National Open Schooling.

At KNB, there is a great deal of emphasis on making children sensitive to Nature, including trees, birds and animals. They are taught to observe and appreciate Nature. Issues of child labour, equality, women's rights, globalisation, pollution, energy saving and biodiversity are discussed in the class. Other activities like field visits, camps, slide shows, quiz programmes, butterfly rearing and maintaining a diary of flowering trees are carried out regularly. Recently, the school carried out a tree census in Phaltan town.

The annual school project has been an important part of the KNB programme for more than a decade. Each year, the entire school—from Classes I to IX—spends two to three weeks working on a given theme. Many of these projects have dealt with themes related to Phaltan, its environment or history. Two of the projects were on more abstract themes of violence and children's rights. Sometimes, the themes are influenced by natural disasters like a drought or a flood affecting this part of the country. Students collect information from the library and the Internet, interview people, visit places and make observations. Back in school, they collate the information and translate them into essays, maps, charts and pictures, poems and models. The entire material is assembled for an exhibition, which is open to parents, teachers and students from other schools as also to the general public.

Another annual feature of the KNB programme, for a number of years, has been the work experience programme for Class VIII students. Each year, the students are divided into groups for a week. Each group is assigned one workplace. The workplaces have included goat farms, poultry farms, nurseries and centres for

appropriate rural technology. This hands-on experience gives the students a taste of the real world of work. Students of Classes VIII and IX also learn printing on the offset press donated by a well-wisher.

The atmosphere at school is relaxed and supportive. The teachers are given a free hand in trying out experiments and using innovative methods. Dr Manjiri Nimbkar (a physician by profession and teacher by choice), who became its principal in 1996, says, 'It's the new ideas that we incorporate in our teaching process that helps our students think beyond narrow horizons. And students are indeed thinking beyond the immediate'.

There is a graded curriculum to develop library skills right from the time when students cannot read. The curriculum includes graded reading, illustrating stories, designing the cover, getting to know the writers and publishers, learning to talk about the characters in a story, looking up reference books, learning the art of taking care of books, writing poems, completing an incomplete story and finally, reviewing a book.

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AKSHARNANDAN

Location: Near the age old Chaturshringi temple, Pune.

Philosophy: Aksharnandan values integration. The school believes that human scale education needs schools that are small and firmly anchored in their communities, thus connecting the classroom with the world outside and integrating Nature and everyday life situations into all aspects of learning.

What is different? The walls of Aksharnandan are alive with children's work: a list of questions they asked the friendly bank manager, sketches of the houses they saw from the top of the hill, a child's description of how it felt to get soaked in the rain, colourful handkerchiefs showing off newly acquired skills of hemming... In a certain sense, these walls speak of the integration that Aksharnandan so greatly values.

This integration runs right through the weave of the school's fabric from the children admitted to the school (who are from varied economic backgrounds, along with a few physically and mentally challenged children) to the teaching methodology. Academic studies are interwoven with productive activities such as farming, cooking and craft work.

As you walk around the school, you may come across Class VI preparing for its sale of tie-and-dye *bandhani* scarves at the annual school bazaar. Their art and craft class now culminates in math with meaning: how, they wonder, should they price the scarves so that they are attractive to buy, but also make a profit? Classification, as a topic, may appear dry to some, but not to the Class II children here: having sorted the leaves that they collected, the class finds 18 different ways of classifying them! Thus, the lessons here emphasise the connectedness and relatedness of everything. No topic is viewed in isolation.

For instance, a lesson on letter writing would concern itself not only with content, style and grammar, but would end up with a visit to the post office, purchasing postage stamps, mailing the letter, understanding postal sorting, pin codes, postman's duties and also what happens to undelivered mail. In addition, the lesson would deal with different types of writing materials—papers, pens, inks—and would also touch on electronic mail and the Internet. It would also explore the pleasures of philately, for good measure.

The school promotes the curriculum and methodology that are deeply rooted in local traditions and culture. It aims at inculcating in children a love for learning, fearlessness, belief in oneself and one's abilities, and it nurtures a spirit of excellence in the broad sense that includes caring, responsibility and the constructive use of one's faculties.

Children are encouraged to freely question, to be bold and enquiring, to express themselves spontaneously, but always with self-discipline and responsibility. Aksharnandan is committed to free the minds of children from casteism, communal enmity, religious fanaticism and gender inequality.

As you walk out of the school campus, you pause to see Class X on their way to visit a settlement of migrant shepherds. 'What', asks a class X student 'is the relevance of granting Constitutional

rights to this community?’ Civics, for these children, is certainly not something that is taught out of a boring chapter in a book!

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SAHYADRI SCHOOL

Location: The school is located on Tiwai Hill, a plateau 770 m above sea level, overlooking the Bhima River, 70 km from Pune, Maharashtra.

Philosophy: In the words of J. Krishnamurti, the founder,

From ancient times, man has sought something beyond the materialistic world, something immeasurable, something sacred. It is the intent of this school to inquire into this possibility. If we concentrate very much on examinations, on technological information, on making the child clever, proficient in acquiring knowledge while we neglect the other side, then the child will grow up into a one-sided human being. What we are now trying to do is to join both of them together. If there is proper education, the student will not treat them as two separate fields. He will be able to move in both as one movement; in making himself technologically perfect, he will also make himself a worthwhile human being.

What is different? On this quiet hilltop, the children and teachers breathe pure air which is a rarity in most cities today. Amidst trees and birdsong, you may find your mind naturally slowing down to observe the world outside and within, and to grapple with the questions that inevitably arise.

Sahyadri is a child-centred school. It gives children a chance to experience an unpressured childhood. The child's interactions with other children and adults in the community afford a great opportunity to learn about right relationship. As there are only about 20 children in a class or dorm, each child receives nourishing affection and attention from teachers and house parents. Importantly, a child

is valued for the unique individual he or she is, and is not compared with another. This creates a secure environment for the child to grow.

Noticeable in the children here is a relative absence of fear. When fear is not used as a method of control, children learn to think independently and speak their minds freely. Whatever the subject, Sahyadri endeavours to get children to think and make discoveries for themselves.

Learning is joyous when not motivated through reward and punishment. The child begins to discover what it means to learn out of interest, and gradually discovers what s/he loves to do. The culture class provides a space for open-ended dialogue, where students and educators together explore fundamental questions about life.

These keystones of education at Sahyadri serve to create a culture in which the child may grow up as a free thinker and a passionate learner. Nurturing this culture is the lifeblood of Sahyadri School.

In Classes IV to VIII, the curriculum encourages observation, working with the hands, enquiry, reflection and creative expression. Senior School (Classes IX and X) brings a climate of greater freedom as well as responsibility. The quality of dialogue deepens even as students take initiative in planning and organising school events. Weekends witness participation from students and teachers in a wide variety of informal clubs and activities; to name a few—film club, writers' forum, reporters' club, reading club, listening club, cosmos club, music and theatre club, sketching club, papier-mâché, macramé, conversations about life, cooking club and handyman club.

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VIGYAN ASHRAM—RURAL DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION SYSTEM (RDES)

Location: Located amongst several small hamlets in Pune's village Pabal, which is a central market place.

Philosophy: Vigyan Ashram believes that ‘learning while doing’, that is, the natural system of learning is the best way to teach India’s vast population. For its development, India needs this ability to *do and think in coordination*—the marriage of the head and the hand. We must adopt the ‘learning by doing’ approach. If 90 per cent of our population lives by the hand alone, then it is better for us, Vigyan Ashram believes, to reach the head through the hand. Working with the hands stimulates thinking.

What is different? As you walk around Vigyan Ashram, you stop to look at the building and furniture, and are awestruck when you are told that the building, furniture—and even computers in the ashram—are made by the students!

Vigyan, for Vigyan Ashram, is the ‘search for Nature’ and *Ashram* symbolises ‘simple living’. Here, education is of a different kind, eliminating the formal structure of a classroom, blackboard and books, and incorporating the wisdom of life, experience, and hands-on work. There is no classroom teaching. Instead, multi-skill training is offered in:

- **Engineering:** Fabrication, carpentry, construction and so on.
- **Energy Environment:** Electrical, diesel and non-conventional energy sources, water conservation and so on.
- **Agriculture–Animal Husbandry:** Agri techniques, poultry, dairy, goat farming and so on.
- **Home and Health:** Sewing, knitting, food-processing, rural laboratory and so on.

Over the years, Vigyan Ashram has developed a programme, the Rural Development Education System (RDES), for giving training to the youth in rural and urban areas. The programme is offered in formal schools as well as for school dropouts. Along with the multi-skill training described earlier, the other unique features of the programme are:

- **Methodology:** Children work with the instructors in all the school’s sections. For example, they learn drawing, costing

and measurement—not as a separate subject—as a part of completing a certain job/project. The same applies to agriculture and all other sections.

- **School as a production centre:** The instructor brings the order from the community and he completes it with the help of students. Instructors take various rural development and community infrastructure maintenance services (for example, repairing old buildings, repairing hand pumps, street light maintenance and so on).
- **Instructor as an entrepreneur:** The instructor has to earn at least a part of his income by providing *community service*. There is no formal qualification required for the instructor, but he must have some hands-on skills. Skilled artisans from the community are also involved to train the students.

To increase the pace and the quality of the education delivery system, RDES has also adopted information technology.

The system of 'learning while doing, in real-life situations', involves doing community service work as a part of education. Education and development have been integrated: so these are students who will take on day-to-day challenges as part of their course work!

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GRAM-MANGAL

Location: Gram-Mangal is located on the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra in a predominantly tribal area of Maharashtra.

Philosophy: In addition to Gram-Mangal's main focus of bringing quality elementary education to the doorsteps of tribal and rural children, they have committed themselves to revolutionising the childhood education system itself, in rural and urban areas alike.

What is different? At Gram-Mangal, they decided to try something that no other school in Western India had tried. Using the

solid foundation laid by educationists like Froebel and Montessori, Gram-Mangal has developed, by carrying out extensive research and field-study, what they claim to be a totally new non-formal education system during the past 10 years.

Gram-Mangal's non-formal education method is consistent with the concept of joyful education, where education is not thrust upon the children, but is made joyful, so that each child learns willingly, at his/her own pace. The non-formal child education system, introduced by Gram-Mangal, is consistent with methodologies designed by child education experts worldwide. At the same time, it keeps the children in close touch with their community, society and the environment.

Gram-Mangal has developed a system of self-education with the help of scientifically developed educational aids. These aids are nothing but handy materials with which the children are encouraged to play.

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KHELGHAR

Location: 1.5 km from Laxminagar slum in Pune, Maharashtra.

Philosophy: The school's philosophy is based on the experiences of teachers during the past eight years of working with children:

- to provide opportunities to children so that they know the joy of learning,
- to work for the development of different learning abilities in children,
- to help children overcome hurdles in their school education and
- to encourage children to decide their goals, which will facilitate their own development along with their community.

What is different? Two years ago, Raju did not speak to anyone because he could not understand Marathi, as his family had migrated from a village to Pune in search of work. One of the volunteers noticed this and kept speaking and reading to him in Marathi. When he began to respond, he showed an interest in science and working with his hands. His confidence grew and he began to repair broken toys, among other things. Today, Raju helps in teaching younger children!

Khelghar was started in 1996 by the Palakneeti Pariwar Trust to impart education to children from Laxminagar slum. It took seven long years to really understand the needs of these children and then create opportunities for them to experience the joy of learning. To encourage these children, the teachers at Khelghar have a few simple ground rules: every child is allowed to learn at his/her pace and no one is forced to attend Khelghar; punishments and rewards are not given; cooperation rather than competition is encouraged and self-evaluation is encouraged. This has helped to build an atmosphere conducive to learning which, in turn, has instilled confidence in these children.

With the help of philanthropists, Khelghar has a library of 2,000 books and a small science laboratory. There are two rooms in which classes are held and another for audiovisual activities. Art and craft material is given to children to discover their creative faculties. Subjects are reinforced with the use of flash cards and charts.

Math, English, Marathi and social sciences are taught to the children in Marathi. Teachers do not try to teach the whole school curriculum but try to teach the basic concepts. Learning is encouraged through activity-based methods. Evaluation is done through observation of the child through discussions, write-ups on self-expression and events like *dukan jatra*.

Teachers and trustees try to work with parents of the children, who are encouraged to jointly take decisions with the former. Khelghar holds weekly counselling sessions for parents and visits their homes. In Khelghar, learning is not restricted to children. Teachers undergo training in particular subjects. Besides this, they conduct weekly meetings to discuss their experiences and hold common reading sessions.

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ANKUR—SOCIETY FOR ALTERNATIVES IN EDUCATION

Location: Hauz Khas, New Delhi

Philosophy: Ankur is committed to an education that strengthens the connectedness between learning, life and societal contexts. For the children, young people and women with whom Ankur interacts, the educational process strives to open possibilities of thinking, being and imparting meaning to the world in which people live. Ankur aims to build a society that affirms dignity of life, sharing of resources, dialogue and non-violence.

What is different? Ankur's classes always begin with lessons that lead to a discovery of the self. Ankur believes that the first step in understanding others is understanding oneself.

Society and life experiences form the text that participants 'read' and interpret. In the process, the participants become creators of knowledge and builders of dynamic alternative curricula. The sites for exploration are primarily in the urban marginalised communities. The Learning Centres, *Bal Clubs*, *Kitab Ghars* and *Compughars* provide the live spaces for the experiments and articulations of children, young people and the facilitators. They extend an 'invitation' to them to delve deeper into the processes, and nurture a relationship built on mutuality, association and dialogue.

Working through a child-centred and feminist perspective, the process focusses on developing self-confidence, creative criticality and a respect for plurality. Children and young people are encouraged to question the texts, the facilitator and each other. They find an open floor to unload and unpack their fears, restlessness, dilemmas and dreams. Explorations allow for contradictions, ambivalence and tentativeness. It makes the participants more open to diverse opinions and experiences, and inspires them to

view their perceptions and their understanding of the world around them in a new light.

The outreach in the communities stretches to cover parents, other adults and local schools, facilitating a deeper understanding of the world of the child, of the mainstream education system, of the possibilities of creativity, compassion and change. Forms of interaction in the community include parents' meetings, *shiksha samitis*, mobile library and locality events.

Beyond the building of alternatives and expanding of community-outreach, Ankur (along with other NGOs, educational institutions, activists and academics) strives for educational and social change through training, collaborations and advocacy for child's rights and people's rights. Research, documentation and publication are an important dimension of Ankur's work.

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SAAKSHAR, RUN BY THE VIGYAN VIJAY FOUNDATION

Location: Amidst the hustle and bustle of a city like Delhi, this school is located in Najafgarh, southwest Delhi.

Philosophy: Education is vital to effect a change in society.

What is different? Balsakhis (local name for 'monitors') constantly interact with the child, the child's family and teachers to plug any information gaps between the three and keep all of them sufficiently motivated towards continuing the formal education of the child.

Saakshar was started under the aegis of the Vigyan Vijay Foundation (VVF). Education being its primary focus, VVF initiated a programme to check the dropout percentage from government schools. Under this programme, the focus is on providing preparatory/bridge courses for dropouts, children from slum pockets or those from migrant families.

This initiative took off in April 2002 in a *dharamshala* with the help of two teachers. Due to its growing numbers, today Saakshar runs from a rented building with 70 students and 4 teachers.

Over the years, VVF realised that children dropped out of school to look after their siblings. To deal with this hurdle, VVF started a crèche for the young ones in the age groups of 0–3 years, while their older siblings attended school. Here, early intervention and basic concepts are learnt to prepare them for formal education later.

Non-formal education, starting at the preparatory level, is given to children who are in the age group of 4–8 years. The focus is on integrating these children into formal schools. Children who are sent to mainstream schools are given remedial classes. Apart from building the confidence of these children, the foundation also looks after their nutrition: a well-balanced midday meal is provided to the children, apart from adequate supplements.

Besides these initiatives, vocational training is given to adolescent boys and girls. These youngsters learn cutting and tailoring, candle-making, screen-printing and typing, and get training for becoming beauticians.

In the near future, VVF plans to launch an adult literacy programme and educate people on issues of health, savings and self-advocacy.

What has changed? 0 per cent drop out after VVF intervened.

School attendance of children from the slums has gone up to 60 per cent from 33 per cent.

Aptly, the blurb on the website reads, 'I changed today...for a better tomorrow.'

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Website: www.vigyanvijay.org

L'AVENIR (THE FUTURE), THE GNOSTIC CENTRE

Location: The Gnostic Centre is situated within the precincts of a beautiful, vast farm in Bijwasan, New Delhi.

Philosophy: The Gnostic Centre was set up with the purpose of creating a space for those who seek a more integral knowledge; about themselves as well as the world. Sri Aurobindo and The Mother speak thus of integral education: 'Education, to be complete, must have five principal aspects relating to the five principal

activities of the human being: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual.'

What is different? The Centre offers a space to young children that combines the warmth of growing up in an atmosphere of love, with the joy of discovering oneself and all that is around...the colours, the sounds, the numbers, the words, the ants, the grass, the emotions, the movements, the silence. All these combine to offer them a time to dream and a time to make these dreams come true.

The Gnostic Centre is a research centre for the growth of consciousness. Education should include all aspects of the human being and life rather than only the intellectual domain. Thus, the teachers here systematically train students to develop and perfect the various human capacities that impact their thinking and perception, modes of behaviour and interaction, levels of commitment and action.

Lavenir (the future) is the playschool started by The Gnostic Centre in 2001, for 2-4 year olds. At Lavenir, the focus is on the different aspects of the growing child. It aims to help him/her to begin 'knowing himself/herself'. Its future plans are to extend upwards as a full-fledged school.

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Fax: Not available

E-mail: gnostic@nda.vsnl.net.in, gnostic@gnosticcentre.com

Website: www.gnosticcentre.com

BRIGHT'S HIGH SCHOOL

Location: In the serene and pollution-free hill station of Pondicherry, very close to the airport.

Philosophy: 'Where the mind is without fear' is the foundation on which this school stands. Emphasis is given to instilling confidence in the children to face challenges that life has to offer.

What is different? Being confident about one's ability is a life skill that is emphasised in this school. Here is a system where children are not failed or detained. Instead, they are encouraged to overcome

their shortcomings. Its principal, Mollie John, says that without this approach, the detained child, in all probability, would become a dropout by Class VIII.

Since its inception, 15 years ago, Bright's High School has followed the approach of encouraging children to be happy to just learn without the fear of failure. However, realising their potential is what Mollie John is doing. 'Reach the Unreached' are special classes for the slow learner, the average student and the gifted child. Urging the child to work hard does not mean having to study at odd hours. Hence, special classes are not held early in the morning or late in the evening.

Apart from the integration of students of different mental aptitudes, normal children coexist with differently abled children. This coeducational institution has about 200 children from varied backgrounds, many of whom are first-generation learners.

The NCERT syllabus is followed up to Class VIII. Classes IX to X follow the State Board syllabus. Apart from the regular subjects, students are exposed to yoga, art, craft, karate, dance and drama. A three-language approach is followed, where English is the medium of instruction. Second and third languages are chosen from Hindi, Tamil, Sanskrit, French and Malayalam. The focus is on Value Education, for which classes comprise of children enacting plays with various themes. Counsellors are present to help children, parents and teachers.

This school has a laboratory where students can conduct science experiments. To encourage its students, a three-day science and art exhibition is held every year.

Class III is learning about the Indian states and their capitals. A big map of India (about 2½ feet by 2½ feet) is drawn on cardboard with the states marked. Details of each state, such as official language, chief ministers, main crops and industry are written and then the map is cut in pieces. The students in each group join this giant jigsaw puzzle to complete the map! This is one of the ways in which learning is made fun.

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls.

Extract from Rabindranath Tagore's poem

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PRIMROSE SCHOOL

Location: The school is located in the former French colony of Pondicherry.

Philosophy: It is the mission of Primrose School to provide children with a creative, nurturing and stimulating environment, in which strong skills are developed for emotional, social and academic growth.

What is different? A school that does not give homework? Here is one: at least until Class VI, children in Primrose School do not encounter formal exams or homework!

In Primrose School, the methods evolved by Dr Glenn Doman of the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential, USA, are employed. This system awakens the curiosity of the child even as early as pre-KG, or at two years of age. They practise his method of flash cards for early reading and general knowledge. There is a joy in constantly learning new information shown on the flash cards and pride in the new skill of reading. They also believe in the power of technology to inspire children and have computers in all classrooms from UKG onwards.

With a teacher–student ratio of 1:10, each child in this school receives the attention s/he needs to flower and discover his/her talents. They maintain only one section per standard of 30 children.

Besides giving the children academic freedom and encouraging their curiosity, the effort is also to pass on certain values to them, like truthfulness, punctuality, honesty, generosity, kindness, self-confidence, sincerity and simplicity.

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Website: www.primroseschool.org

DIGANTAR

Location: Spread over more than 2 acres, Digantar, in Jagatpura, is located on the outskirts of Jaipur, Rajasthan.

Philosophy: Digantar believes that the process of learning should be self-sustaining if it is to continue for the entire life. Elementary education should be to 'help the child become an independent and motivated learner.' Hence, an educational system has to recognise that lifelong learning is possible only if the learning process is based on the child's life experience. Any kind of grafting (disguised or otherwise) while the child grows is bound to stunt the process of the increasingly sophisticated organisation of the child's experiences.

What is different? Digantar has no attendance record, no uniform and no syllabus. The curriculum and pedagogy followed in this school are based on the principles of learning with understanding, learning to learn and freedom of pace of learning.

Digantar tries to establish principles such as: real learning does not arise from compulsion. Since the children are free to come and go as they please, it is the responsibility of the teacher to motivate the child; the teacher and the child are simultaneous learners, and cooperation, rather than mutual competition, has to be a primal value.

The stress, all along, is on the growth of the child, who proceeds at his/her own pace. A significant emphasis is on practical activities, not to teach a skill, but to help them get a grip on different dimensions of life. It strives for excellence and 'success' in promoting an environmentally sensitive, child-centred mutual learning (not teaching) process. Digantar also works towards making the teacher-child relationship a democratic one, of mutual caring. The main concern of the organisation is to contribute to the improvement in the quality of elementary education.

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Website: www.learningnet-india.org/lni/data/groups/alted/digantar/index.php

VIDYA BHAWAN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL AND VIDYA BHAWAN PUBLIC SCHOOL

Location: A vast open campus with scores of decades-old trees that surround these schools, which are situated in the heart of the lake city Udaipur, in the Aravali hills of semi-arid south Rajasthan.

Philosophy: To impart a scientific attitude and the ability to think in a disciplined manner, with a mix of creativity and a spirit of adventure; to approach learning with joy.

What is different? The medium of instruction is bilingual and teachers consciously use the local dialect as well.

Vidya Bhawan was founded in 1931 on the principle of the Scout and Guide movement (as a revolt against the traditional system of school education). Since its inception, it has maintained its commitment to equality and social justice. Children are admitted, regardless of their socio-economic background. Even while struggling against orthodox and financial stringency in the days of feudal and colonial rule in Mewar, it provided facilities for girls to study with boys without any discrimination.

At present, there are 1,000 students and each class has about 25 children. Most of the children come from lower to middle income groups and the city orphanage. The two schools together house a nursery. The junior primary section and the senior secondary section, which are taught through Hindi, are affiliated to the State Board. The recently added public school is affiliated to CBSE.

The school has an open environment and volunteers from various countries spend time in the school to interact with the children and thus broaden their horizons. Language skills are encouraged by keeping children's books within easy access in the library and classrooms. Children are encouraged to read during their free time.

The school has a mathematics activity room to encourage independent learning at the junior level. This provides students an opportunity to use various ways and tools to create concrete examples of abstract concepts in the math syllabus. Similarly, there are ongoing efforts to demystify concepts in other subjects. At other levels, teachers continue their attempts at evolving activities in

every subject to encourage understanding of the concepts instead of rote learning.

The school has large grounds, fields, an orchard and a hand-made paper unit. Students are exposed to processes ranging from growing saplings into trees to producing paper and paper products. The school orchard is also maintained by them.

Education is not restricted to the school compound; the libraries in the villages are maintained by the students. Residential camps are organised, in which students and villagers conduct various programmes together, so that students understand the local problems and learn to work with responsibility and cooperation.

The school networks with neighbouring schools with a view to set up processes by which teachers can share their ideas and learn from one another.

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Website: www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/308/progress.htm

ISAI AMBALAM SCHOOL

Location: On the periphery of the industrial zone of Auroville, Pondicherry, Isai Ambalam School adjoins both Alankuppam and Kottakkarai villages.

Philosophy: The school follows the fundamental principles of education as enunciated by Sri Aurobindo: joy, freedom, learning by doing and self-learning. In addition, an effort is made to create conditions under which the students can become aware of a higher energy level in their lives—the Grace—and can invoke it.

What is different? Young adults who could not learn all the Tamil alphabets for more than four months, have now learnt to read as well as write within one month! This is the wonder that has been wrought by one of the teaching methods that the school has adopted: the use of study cards that are stacked in a certain sequence. The students take out the cards themselves, and perform the learning activities in each card as they learn the subject content. You may see some other young adults listening to an audio tape in order to learn English.

Since 1996, Isai Ambalam has been specialising in conducting experiments in education by adopting innovative and comprehensive educational methods, which make learning easier, faster, more joyous and context oriented. One of these is the Glenn Doman method, started by a man (of that name) who was convinced that 3–4 year-old children could learn to read in several languages using this method. Glen Doman's method activates and awakens the brain at an early age and stimulates its growth to the fullest genetic capacity. Through his methods, children are able to recognise and understand hundreds of words in several languages even before they can speak or walk! By the time they are ready to enter primary school, they can attain the reading, writing and general knowledge normally achieved after six years of schooling. And all this is done through very simple methods that every mother can practise at home with her own children. Here, the teachers apply the 'Glenn Doman method' for imparting reading skills in Tamil and English, and general knowledge to the children, and find that they joyously respond to this method of learning.

Creative and play-way activities are a part of every day of the preschool children. The learning of the students occurs not only at the mental level but also at the vital, physical and psychic levels.

The young adults are given challenges or problems to tackle, which involve the study of their subject matter. The teachers create the challenges or problems from the subject matter to be learnt. Called the *Education By Design Method*, students are taught to prepare (with some help) their own learning plans or programmes for one to three months and to take total responsibility for their successful implementation.

Critical thinking, creative organisation, problem-solving, decision-making and management skills are honed by the use of this method.

Three groups of students are given a short challenge: they should drop an egg from a height of 3 metres and it should not break! Each group is given three sheets of newspaper, some clay, three balloons and a glass of water, which they can use to tackle the challenge. It is interesting to see how each group uses the tools differently and the only group that succeeded was the one which put the egg inside the clay, rolled it into a ball, put the ball inside a bag made of newspaper, filled the balloon with air and tied the bag to the mouth of the balloon! Reason? They decided to use the principle of the parachute!

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E-mail: isaibambalamschool@auroville.org.in

Website: www.auroville.org

NEW CREATION SCHOOL

Location: The school is located in Auroville, Pondicherry, near Kuilapalayam village.

Philosophy: New Creation prioritises the aspiration of those original inhabitants and their children, who have lived on the piece of land that ultimately became Auroville. The teachers of New Creation hope that one day the children will become better equipped to fight against both the visible and invisible limitations that exist in their lives and the lives of others in their immediate surroundings.

What is different? It is the aim of the school to bring down the rate of dropouts of the poor village students.

New Creation participates in Auroville's unique and challenging experiment by creating a congenial, non-authoritarian atmosphere in which these village children can open themselves to an integral learning process.

All pupils in Class VII have the opportunity, each March, to take a test for entry (during the following school year) into the Gentilesse School (where they are able to study in preparation for Class X), or into After School (where they can study for Classes X and XII), giving them the possibility of entry into the university.

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Website: www.auroville.org/education/village_schools/ncs/index.htm

THE SCHOOL

Location: Set in the beautiful grounds of Damodar gardens on the campus of the Theosophical Society, Chennai, the campus with tall and ancient trees, exudes an aura of serenity and great beauty.

Philosophy: Under the umbrella of the teachings of Shri J. Krishnamurti, the school's intention is to discover and nurture a motivation for learning that is not born of comparison—Learning to enquire, to look at oneself, to relate rightly with people and Nature. This school is a constantly questioning, evolving institution with the intention of creating an environment, a climate where one can bring about, if at all possible, a 'new mind'.

What is different? With about 25 students in a class and total student strength of less than 350, there is room for a lot of interaction and conversation between students and teachers. Assemblies of melodious and tuneful singing are held twice a week, and often, walking past a class, one can catch the song that students are singing. Here is a school where structure, administration, curricula and methodology have all been explored for change and innovation.

With their own curriculum until Class VIII, the school students write the ICSE and ISC examinations of the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations thereafter. The Junior School works, in Classes II, III and IV, in a Mixed Age Group (MAG) context, each group comprising 20–25 students of ages ranging from 6½ to 9, and one anchor teacher. This kind of grouping that the school has discovered fosters naturally wholesome and healthy interaction among children of varying ages. Slowly, as students pass through middle school, they are presented with increasing opportunities to undertake self-study. An unusual set of courses is offered in middle school to Classes VI, VII and VIII, comprising environmental studies, health, safety and sex education, and media studies. All students have some work under 'rota', while students of Class V and above take turns for responsibilities like washing plates, laying out the dining hall, cleaning the dining hall and classrooms.

In senior school, the choice of subjects is not restricted to the traditional combination and students are encouraged to find

subjects they like and wish to study, even if these are unusual combinations. With a special programme for Class XI, students taste the usual academic components and, in addition, enjoy an exposure to wilderness, encounter social and environmental issues and spend time on the school farm.

A boy of Class V raises his hand without a trace of self-consciousness or fear to ask a question of Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna, after a talk delivered by this illustrious environmentalist...there is a palpable absence of fear in the quiet atmosphere of this school.

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ABACUS MONTESSORI SCHOOL

Location: Set in what was once a mango orchard, the Abacus Montessori School in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, has retained its rustic character, with some trees still largely untouched.

Philosophy: Abacus was set up to bring new thinking into the life of a school, to work with new ideas in education and to evolve an intensely child-focussed school.

What is different? Here is a school where children choose their own learning environment: whether or not to learn in groups, with or without children of their own age, and of mixed skills... In a mixed age group, Abacus has found, children not only share their talent and skills with others, but more importantly, direct their own learning.

Children need to learn with spontaneity, rather than be taught. And, there needs to be the right learning environment for spontaneity to flourish. Abacus firmly believes that the child will learn naturally, as long as s/he is in an environment consisting of learning opportunities suited to her/his own specific abilities and interests.

At Abacus, students are provided with an environment that is just right for their specific age group. They have the opportunity to choose their work and to decide whether to work individually

or in small groups. Independent of the academic schedule, Abacus actively encourages and facilitates participation in a number of clubs, performing arts, sports and other extra-curricular activities.

The school has classes up to Class X and is affiliated to the Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations, New Delhi.

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Website: www.abacusnow.com

ALPHA TO OMEGA LEARNING CENTRE

Location: Within the city limits on the main road in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Philosophy: Learning disability is not a barrier for higher education.

What is different? A former student of Alpha to Omega composed a poem about Life in the real world. An excerpt:

It's not a pretty world
At least not in reality.
So, girl, you better learn to stand on your own.
You better have faith in your ability, have faith in yourself.

Alpha to Omega Learning Centre was started in 1988 with one-to-one tutoring for dyslexic students. The school grew as more parents recognised and teachers understood the benefits of remedial education. The school aims to:

- offer holistic learning to students with learning disabilities,
- provide intensive early intervention for children termed at risk from learning disabilities,
- provide opportunities to students for personal and professional development and
- provide a variety of teaching tools based on proven research for teachers, professionals and parents.

The school has designed the core curriculum after extensive study and research on various methods of teaching. Several methods of instruction are followed, namely, multi-sensory, cumulative- and phonic-based instruction, the Learning Strategies Instruction model and Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment (FIE) programme.

The Orton Gillingham Multi-sensory Method is used to teach reading and spelling. Through this method, the child learns how sounds and letters are related, and how they act in words. The Strategic Intervention Models are used for writing and comprehension; students learn how to recall the main idea in a text, and specific details they have read. Students use the mnemonic RAP to remind themselves to read, ask questions and put the main idea and details into their own words. Math is taught based on the Montessori method. The Instrumental Enrichment Programme, developed by Professor Reuven Feuerstein, is used to improve the children's thinking capacity. This programme is primarily a pencil and paper exercise comprising units or instruments. It has proved beneficial to students with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental retardation, and behavioural and emotional disorders. This programme is a compulsory part of the curriculum at Alpha to Omega Learning Centre. It has been one of the key reasons for the success of the academic programmes. The Centre began its full day intervention programme for students unable to cope with the mainstream.

The school curriculum is based on the National Open School System and thereafter students go on to pursue their higher education with confidence.

Apart from learning the 3 Rs, children are encouraged to take part in counselling sessions, occupational therapy, Nature study, yoga, karate and tai chi.

The Centre also offers services like:

- Full-time schooling
- Assessments
- Remedial tutoring
- Workshops
- Tutor training programmes

- Strategic curriculum
- Instrumental enrichment programmes

If a child can't learn the way you teach, then teach him the way he can learn.

—*Albert Einstein*

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HEADSTART SCHOOL

Location: Kottivakkam, Chennai

Philosophy: The school advocates commitment to altruistic forms of education. By setting an example of innovative education, Headstart wants others to believe in the system and try out the same, so that there is a qualitative change in the approach towards early childhood education.

What is different? Here is a school where you will come across children of flower vendors as well as children with special abilities, intermingled with children of business tycoons, having 'normal' abilities. fifteen per cent of the children admitted to Headstart are specially challenged, and this, admits the school's management, benefits the remaining 85 per cent to a greater degree than it does the 15 per cent!

Headstart is committed to inclusive education, which not only encourages the special child to be mainstreamed but also helps other children to become sensitive and responsible adults.

As you walk around the school, you will find not more than 15 children being taught by one teacher. What is more, the teaching is mostly through fun and games. Standing in a circle, the children go round and round to the sound of the teacher clapping. Then, when she stops clapping they look at the word-cards dropped before their feet and read the word aloud.

Headstart's curriculum is fun-filled and full of variety, with art, craft, dance, music and computer-aided learning of subjects

integrated into the curriculum. It is designed to tackle the limited attention span that children possess. The accent is on activity-oriented learning, which encourages the questioning mind. The variety of methods the school employs gives the children the space to work according to their individual likes and at a pace that they are comfortable with. Each child is challenged at his/her level of competence and consequently feels a sense of achievement and derives confidence thereof to explore further. Children take part in a number of projects that involve reference work, field trips, discussions, making a book on the topic and model-making. Children are taught to seek information on their own. This develops a strong foundation for self-reliance.

In the culture classes held periodically, children at Headstart express their views freely and thus preserve their individuality. The degree of freedom they enjoy assists them to see right from wrong by themselves.

There is continuous effort towards upgrading the skills of the staff through browsing, training programmes and interaction with other schools. Their detailed reporting aims to measure the child's strengths and opportunities as opposed to weaknesses and threats, without being critical, with a view to finding out how the school and the parents together can bring out the best in the child.

No red pens are used by teachers while correcting the books! The school does not take part in any inter-school competitions, as a result of which they learn without having to earn a reward or a punishment. During parent-teacher meetings, the concerned child is always present: after all, the child may have something to say about his/her progress or the lack of it!

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Website: www.headstartschool.org

TVS EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Location: The two schools that are part of the Society are located on large campuses filled with a variety of trees and shrubs. In this

environment children grow up to appreciate Nature and naturally assimilate the serenity of their surroundings.

Philosophy: To encourage intellectual growth and promote personal development through a variety of experiences that foster a sense of excellence, nurture the creative spirit, cultivate a respect for the environment and build a commitment to the community. Through these rich learning experiences students become caring, intelligent and reflective human beings.

What is different? The schools believe that learning is made more meaningful by providing experiences and opportunities to observe, question, reflect and dialogue upon issues that affect the students and their communities. One of the primary aims of the schools is to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning by helping them set goals and develop benchmarks based on their skills, interests and abilities.

Among its institutions, TVS Educational Society manages two schools—The TVS Academy (Hosur) and The TVS Academy (Tumkur). The schools are coeducational and the children come from lower to middle income families, with parents who are industrial workers, small farmers, small traders and professionals. Each of the schools has about 450 children and 42 teachers, having a teacher–student ratio of about 1:11. Each class has about 30–37 children. Classes I to V have two teachers per class to ensure individual attention. The schools are equipped with junior and senior school libraries, math and science labs, an audiovisual room, and designated rooms for art and craftwork. To support its theatre and music activities, the schools have an outdoor and indoor theatre facility.

The schools' practices are based on the belief that individuals differ in their abilities and needs, and thus, learning should be student-centred. Therefore, the teaching/learning strategies, instructional material and texts used in the school have been developed with a focus on self-directed learning.

The teachers use a variety of methods in the classroom—from teacher lectures to student presentations. For instance, in the junior school, children learn in groups based on the activity, the theme or their abilities. In the middle and senior sections, the

teaching strategies emphasise both student-led discussions, presentations and projects as well as teacher lectures and expositions.

The schools believe that children should interact with their communities and respond to community concerns in whatever ways they can, so that they become responsible and concerned members of society. Thus, students work on projects like organic farming, gender inequality, waste disposal, rural schooling, rural health and conservation. These issues are not only debated in the classroom but are taken to the streets, literally, through street theatre, highlighting their concerns to the public at large.

The education programme stresses the importance of students setting benchmarks for themselves based on their performance, so that a cycle of continuous improvement is set in place. Evaluation is three-pronged: peer, self and the teacher. These evaluation results are analysed and discussed with the students from Class VI onwards. This helps them set realistic goals and gradually build on their achievements.

Music, arts and crafts are given great importance and children use these skills to produce material for their theatre programmes and for the various projects that they undertake. Weaving and pottery are taught by local craft persons; thus, functional aesthetics is stressed, so that children understand the practical use of art in daily life. Further, they are encouraged to design products for specific uses. Art exhibitions, music and theatre workshops form a regular part of the curriculum.

A programme on values forms the core of the personal development programme, wherein children explore personal issues and social problems through dialogues, simulations, discussions and meditation. These interactions are meant to help students develop fresh insights and perceptions, and act with greater self-awareness and sensitivity.

A former student remembers:

Here we walked leisurely feeling the little shrubs and flowers,
Observing the colourful flowers with butterflies feasting on them.
We investigated how the ants lived, how the plants grew.
We lay on the lawns watching the stars.
We peeped through the telescope with excitement
And hoped to understand the mysteries of the night sky.
In this little corner we gossiped.

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Website: www.tvses.org

FOOTSTEPS

Location: In a 'close to nature' atmosphere of a large, shady playground, fanned by natural sea breeze, this school is situated in Kottivakkam, Chennai, very close to the scenic East Coast Road (ECR) and the IT expressway.

Philosophy: A child should have a childhood. This is a preschool that empowers its students to find ready acceptance in premier schools like Sishya, Abacus and so on, after their stint here.

What is different? It is a fun place where children learn to live in harmony with the other inhabitants of Mother Earth. It has 'classrooms without boundaries', and best of all, the companionship of a host of animals—dogs, cats, rabbits, hens, turkeys, pigeons and so on.

Some 25 children are cared for in this 'Garden of Eden' (as they call it) atmosphere, by three well-qualified teachers and helpers. The method of teaching employed does not revolve around charts and pictures. Children are taken outdoors and taught to identify colours, flowers, trees, textures, sounds and the like, in real life. Exercises of practical life are incorporated into everyday activities.

This preschool seeks to combine the best features of education so as to offer a holistic start to learning. It tries to emphasise building confidence, independence and social skills besides developing muscular, motor and visual coordination. The teachers spend time with children individually and impart a host of accomplishments, ranging from conversational skills through yoga to voice training. Children are taught discipline and obedience with respect, and are also taught to appreciate Nature without destroying it.

Simple pleasures in life like following a butterfly to just see where it is going or watching the brown hen lay her eggs are part of this school's curriculum.

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Telephone: +91-44-2451 1314, 098400 24887

Fax: Not available

E-mail: footsteps@vsnl.net

Website: www.chennaionline.com/cityfeature/footsteps.asp

THE CHILDREN'S GARDEN HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL

Location: Surrounded by trees in a three-block building on one of the lanes of Dr Radhakrishnan Salai in Mylapore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Philosophy:

Let none be like the other
Let each be the highest
How can that be?
Let each be perfect in himself.

—Goethe

What is different? To sensitise children to those who are not as fortunate as themselves, regular visits are made by students of this school to old-age homes and special schools.

This school was the brainchild of Dr V. N. Sharma and his wife, Ellen. In 1936, they started with just seven children with the aim of providing education to the poor in Mylapore. Symbolically, the emblem of the school is a banyan tree—that which gives shelter.

This government-aided school has classes from primary to higher secondary. The school has over a thousand children coming from different socio-economic levels; from children of government officers to first-generation learners. Children who are differently abled interact easily with those who are 'normal'. Specially trained teachers help such children to learn in a conducive atmosphere; children with hearing impairment are seated in the first row in the class, so that they can lip read the teacher. Children who are diagnosed with attention deficiency, autism and hyperactiveness are taught separately in the afternoon session.

Children have access to separate laboratories for physics, chemistry, biology and computer science. The library is well stocked with 24,000 books. The state board syllabus is followed and the medium

of instruction is English and Tamil. Apart from these languages, children are taught Telugu and Hindi. Children learn to use the computer from Class V. The students of Class XI are given vocational training apart from the regular course. Choices for vocational training are computer animation, communicative English, communicative Hindi, tailoring, news reading and compering, beautician's course and cooking.

Till Class V, both boys and girls study together. From Classes VI to XII, only girls are admitted.

In the primary sections, learning is through the play-way method. Children in the middle-and high-school level learn through project work. They are also exposed to hands-on experience in the learning process. Different parameters are used for children who are differently abled. They are not assessed on par with normal children. Biology students are taken for Nature walks to the botanical garden of the school, which is 20 km away from the city!

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Website: Not available

THULIR

Location: Between Sitheri hills and Chinna Kalrayan hills in a tribal village in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu.

Philosophy: Their philosophy is threefold:

1. Children from disadvantaged sections in the rural areas need an education that will help them gain self-respect and live with dignity.
2. Children have a natural curiosity and capacity to learn that needs to be nurtured, giving them the space and the right environment.
3. Children need the company of sympathetic adults who can encourage/motivate them to acquire skills and knowledge.

What is different? A boy named Sreyarth wants to create his own land called *Tron*. Can he start writing about the place, the people, what they do and how they speak? ‘Yes,’ he says and goes off to start this project. It keeps him occupied for almost two hours. Much of it is spent in thinking about what the place should be like and what could happen here. Tron will have its own language—*Tronish*—he declares. He remembers reading about ancient hieroglyphics and also of the days when he exchanged secret messages, with his friend, in code. Maybe Tronish can have its own script!...this excites him very much and he goes on to develop new alphabet symbols!

Thulir is an education resource centre for children at Sittilingi. It is a Tamil word meaning ‘a tender shoot’, also ‘to sprout’.

At Thulir, children are motivated by adults who help them to study. Oftentimes, visitors from different professions interact with them and expose them to a wider choice of professions available. For instance, a visitor from England conducted a workshop on clay. As a result, Thulir has a small rudimentary kiln to fire/bake the products.

A typical day at Thulir starts at 9.30 a.m. with children who are home-schooled. Teachers help them with their lessons for two hours and then the children study on their own until the afternoon. Along with them are four boys (of Classes X and XII) who have dropped out of school and come to Thulir in the morning to spend the day. They have been writing their public exam papers and also exploring other avenues of learning. This year, a few more such children may join this group. At present, Krishna and Anuradha, founders of Thulir, are looking at the possibilities of formulating a skills-based learning programme for them, based on the initiative by Vigyan Ashram⁸—Rural Development Education System, Pune.

Three youths who are about 25 years old are undergoing training for a year to help run the resource centre. They arrive at Thulir at 11.30 a.m. and it is time for their training sessions to start. Their first task is to clean and dust the place and then they start language/math classes. After a 45-minute session, they are given exercises to do and the previous day’s exercises are corrected. Mornings are also a time for doing a bit of administration work—accounts, going to the Thulir office to check email, entering stocks, arranging of books and so on.

After lunch at 1.30 p.m., they are on their own and most of this time is spent by them in reading general fiction/non-fiction that they happen to fancy at the given time. They are also given restricted computer time in the afternoons. Occasionally, they are given extra time on the computers doing specific tasks like designing the Thulir webpages or fixing software problems.

Children do not have access to books to read other than textbooks. So a library was set up at Thulir. However, due to lack of confidence, children were afraid to take books and read or browse. So, Krishna and Anuradha started reading out stories to the children to get them interested in reading. This strategy worked, as many children overcame their inhibitions and started picking up books from the library to browse through or read.

It is gardening time from 3:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Each person has his/her own patch where s/he can plant a sapling and look after it. There is much enthusiasm and a mix of flowering plants, fruit trees, saplings and hedges surrounds Thulir.

To develop confidence in the children, exercises were introduced in making small books in Tamil and English along with illustrations. Apart from this, regular story reading sessions continue to be held, so that children hear the languages spoken. Language is taught through games—to teach verbs, the game ‘Follow the Leader’ is played and ‘Bingo’ is played to teach nouns.

With the help of friends, Thulir has a sizeable repertoire of puzzles and self-learning materials that are useful in improving one’s ability to reason and analyse, apart from helping to learn language and math. These are very popular and the children use these materials either singly or in small groups.

‘Anna, we watched on the TV houses broken by the tsunami!!’, says Poornima excitedly. ‘Look, there are pictures of the tsunami in today’s Dinamalar’, says another excited voice. A small group gathers and a class starts on how tsunamis occur and where Indonesia is on the atlas.

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636906, Tamil Nadu

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E-mail: thulir@tribalhealth.org

Website: www.thulir.org

PUVIDHAM LEARNING CENTRE

Location: Puvudham, a small and beautiful village school in Dharmapuri district in Tamil Nadu, is remotely located on a rocky piece of land that was once a barren hill slope, but is now cultivable.

Philosophy: The goal is that the children (and the adults!) at Puvudham should be sensitive to various issues around them, to their environment and community, and also have a set of skills that they can use for their livelihood—whether it be farming, sewing, music, computer-related activities or any other field in which they are interested.

What is different? The school uses:

- Maria Montessori method of learning by doing;
- David Horsburgh's method of experiencing language, math and Science; and
- Mahatma Gandhi's message of love and peace.

There are no exams till the state board level and hence, no competition. Real learning, questioning and solution finding through project work are encouraged. The school did away with a rigid timetable as classes were a response to the interests of the children; so they work within a loose framework, where the morning session is for language and science, and the afternoon session for mathematics and craft. This works in an atmosphere where both the teachers and students are equally surprised at the activities that are included and the manner in which they are conducted with ease and cooperation.

The school has a variable fee structure, depending on the economic situation of the child's family. The school also has children of mixed economic backgrounds.

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Telephone: +91-4342-311641

Fax: Not available

E-mail: meenakshi@puvidham.net

Website: www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/578/Puvudham-Annual-Report-2004-05.pdf

VIDYODAYA SCHOOL

Location: Tucked away in the Blue Mountains, close to Ooty, the tourist destination of Tamil Nadu.

Philosophy: The vision of the school is co-terminus with the philosophy of the Adivasis—to engender a holistic approach to life, without aggression and competition, and with concern for others as well as the environment we live in.

What is different? The school parliament is in session. All the children are present and sit very quietly. Some of the teachers are also present. The President, Secretary and Speaker are all elected students. They call for complaints against both students and teachers. One of the students gets up and complains that one of the other children is not doing his duty regularly. In defense, the other boy replies that he does not like the duty given to him. He is told that as he chose to do it he must continue until the following month when he can choose another duty. Another student says that the teachers are not taking them on trips as promised. The Principal stands up and answers. And so it goes on—all issues are brought here and sorted out. It is treated as a very serious affair.

Vidyodaya School was a small private school started in 1992 for the children of some of the staff of ACCORD⁹, and later, for some from the local community. By 1995, it was not certain whether the school needed to continue or not, as the children for whom it was started were completing their school education. At that juncture, the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam expressed interest in the school and wondered whether this could become a school for Adivasi children. Forty-three children from the Adivasi community joined this school in 1996.

In 2005, there were 116 children who attended Vidyodaya School. These children were first-generation learners. In this school, children can join the school at any age and there is no division of classes, only groups based on ability rather than age. Each group has about 10–12 students and the student–teacher ratio is 11:1. The groups are from preschool to the equivalent of Class VI, after which, children who wish to proceed further become part of the study circle for older children and pursue their academic education by enrolling as private candidates for the Secondary School Leaving Certificate examination of the state government.

Though Vidyodaya School is recognised by the State Government for the primary level, the school follows its own curriculum, norms of text and methodology. Besides tribal children, the school also caters to the education of children with learning disabilities. The medium of instruction is English but Tamil is the language spoken by the children. Surprisingly, the children have no difficulty whatsoever in dealing with this.

Academic classes are conducted from 10.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., with a 40-minute lunch break. Attention is given to each child. The teacher *helps* a child to learn and does not teach. Learning materials are prepared and used in most classes and this allows the child to work at his/her pace and experience discovery. Work is also given, taking into consideration the child's capacity and willingness rather than a common programme.

Instead of periodic assessment, continuous assessment is conducted. Different subjects call for different criteria of evaluation—comprehension, expression, application and ability to relate to the outside world. These are some of the general aspects. Besides these aspects, the child's personality is given importance.

From 1.00 p.m. to 2.00 p.m. all children are engrossed in craft-work. Bead chains, macramé, painting, cross-stitch, embroidery, making of pillow covers, papier-mache, paper boxes, flat wire bags and several other interesting items of marketable quality are made. It is amazing how children as young as five years of age can do such creative and quality craft. From 2.00 p.m. to 3.00 p.m. is the playtime for all the children.

The children make their own storybooks, which tell their personal and community stories. They know each other's tribal music, dance, song and dress. The laboratory is unique—scrap and easily available material is given to the child to experiment without fear of causing damage or breakage. The children are encouraged to conduct experiments at home.

The school has a teacher-training programme and has trained several tribal men and women to be teachers and educators. Three of them teach at Vidyodaya School. There is no hierarchy in the school, and teachers as a team make decisions.

At the end of the year, craft items made by the children are sold at an exhibition. After deducting the material costs, the rest is put into the child's savings account in the school. This helps the child

to become financially independent as far his/her educational needs are concerned.

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Website: www.ativasi.net/vbvt.asp

SHOLAI SCHOOL

Location: The school is situated in the campus of the Centre for Learning, Organic Agriculture and Appropriate Technology, Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu and is designed to merge with the beautiful sylvan surroundings.

Philosophy: The first and foremost interest of Sholai School is that children should grow up to be sensitive, thoughtful and responsible human beings. At the same time, they must be well prepared to meet the world. Here, the emphasis is on self-awareness, responsibility for oneself, one's relationships and the environment.

What is different? This school has no connection to the electricity grid. Surprised? The question arises—then how do they survive? The school has made itself self-sufficient by using electric power and cooking fuel from Nature (solar, micro-hydro, wind and biogas).

Here, there is a greater stress on *learning* than on *teaching*. Sholai School believes that when children are coerced or 'taught', they do not really learn to enjoy the process of *finding things out* for themselves. Only when they learn themselves do the subjects come alive. For example, children discover science best by doing many practical experiments. During the building of their Science Lab, the children learnt the mathematics required to design its roof, and went on to build the roof entirely by themselves!

Although Sholai School follows no particular method or ideology, those familiar with J. Krishnamurti's concepts of education will appreciate their non-coercive approach of endeavouring to free the children from their social conditioning and their past hurts and fears. Hence, students are helped to gain a better understanding of

themselves, guiding them at the same time to appreciate the importance of excellence in their academic studies, and in all that they do.

The syllabi and the textbooks for all subjects are vibrant, interesting and challenging. The subjects taught are organic farming, appropriate technology, solar engineering and woodwork. The teacher–student ratio is kept as low as 1:6. Periodically, teachers may give (non-threatening) tests to their students. In general, Sholai School ensures that the teachers are well aware of the progress of each child. Particularly, they concern themselves with the psychological growth of the students but not according to any blueprint or personal view of the teacher. Twice a year, collateral reports are created—in which both students and teachers are involved in assessing the work of the last four months.

Their Mature Student Programme is for students from India and abroad, aged 18–28 years.

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Telephone: +91-4542-230297, 230393, 230487

Fax: Not available

E-mail: cloaat@yahoo.com, contact@cloaat.org

Website: www.sholaischool.org, www.cloaat.org

MAHAKAVI BHARATHIYAR HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL

Location: The school is part of Sevalaya, a social welfare complex situated on 6.5 acres of own land at Kasuva, a remote village near Chennai in Tamil Nadu.

Philosophy: One of Mahakavi Bharathi's poems about Saraswathi Pooja sums up the philosophy:

Just uttering some mantras, keeping books in front of Saraswathi's photo and offering sandal and flowers is not real Saraswathi pooja. If you open schools in areas where there are no schools and ensure that there is not a single town in this country that remains school-less, that is real Saraswathi pooja. Educating one poor person is a better deed than constructing 1,000 'annadhana salas' and 10,000 temples.

What is different? Mahatma Gandhi said that India lives in its villages. If we can improve the standard of living in the villages, then

we would have done some real service. Hence, all the activities of Sevalaya are carried out in a small village called Kasuva. *Love all, serve all* is the simple but strong statement on their website.

Inspired by Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Mahakavi Bharathi, Sevalaya was founded by V. Muralidharan and his friends. It started functioning in 1988 with five children in a small rented house at Sivanvoil village. During 1990–91, with the support of philanthropic minded public, Sevalaya began operating its own premises situated in 1.52 acres of its own land at Kasuva, a remote village near Chennai, which did not have any medical and schooling facilities. Today, Sevalaya is managed by a trust and runs an orphanage, an old age home, a *goshala*, a craft centre, a library and a medical centre—all situated in its own 6.5 acre campus.

Mahakavi Bharathiyar Higher Secondary School is managed by the Sevalaya Trust. This school is recognised by the Tamil Nadu government. Though it does not receive any government grants, it is a free school with classes from *Balwadi* (pre-KG) to Class XII at the higher secondary level. These children come from neighbouring villages. Most of the children in Kasuva are first-generation school-goers. At present, there are 630 students. The teacher–pupil ratio is 1:30. Education is free to all children, regardless of their background. In addition, textbooks, notebooks, uniforms and transport are provided free of cost.

The school provides value-based education with special emphasis on craft-education to enable the children to become self-reliant. Apart from the syllabus prescribed by the state government, the school has introduced a special subject—the study of the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, Mahakavi Bharathi and Swami Vivekananda, on whose principles this institution is based. A special syllabus has been designed and lessons have been prepared based on the syllabus for Classes VI onwards. For Classes I to V, the life of the great leaders and interesting anecdotes from their lives are told in the form of stories. Carnatic music and Hindi are given as options to the children. Bharathiyar songs also are taught to the children.

Craft education also forms a part of the syllabus, where children are taught skills like book-binding, wire bag making, tailoring, screen printing and cover-making. Mahakavi Bharathiyar Higher Secondary School has been able to bring within the school

net the children who would not otherwise have had access to education or would have been school dropouts.

This is where Mahatma Gandhi's advice is followed: 'We must be the change we wish to see in the world.'

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Fax: Not available

E-mail: sevalaya@vsnl.org

Website: www.sevalaya.org

PRAGYAN SCHOOL

Location: Noida, Uttar Pradesh.

Philosophy: The school motto has been drawn from the words of the Rig Veda, which states: 'May we be the recipients of noble thoughts from all over the universe.' The school ethos encourages the pursuit of supreme knowledge in a child-friendly environment, leading to the wholesome development of the personality. It is an institution which stands for all-round comprehensive quality education that enriches the being of every child—physically, emotionally, mentally, intellectually and spiritually. It is a well-understood fact that the kind of schooling received in the formative years of a child's life, to a large extent, determines success in life. The aim of education is character building and sound development of personality.

What is different? The teaching methodology is child-centred keeping in mind the global vision of holistic experiences. Learning is not made into a dull mundane routine but an interactive experience, where concepts are developed and explained through class discussions, exploration and inferences rather than only through teacher-centred instruction or rote learning. Stress is laid on enabling creative thought and application. Evaluation is a continuous day-to-day process by dialogue and deliberation, and students are encouraged to overcome problems.

Pragyan is a day boarding school working from 8.15 a.m. to 4 p.m.

With a hand-picked, committed and dedicated faculty, the play-way method of learning, the problem-solving approach, learning to analyse the situation, going through the process of reflection, introspection,

deduction and logical conclusion are the salient features of the school. Therefore, developing balanced personalities with self-confidence and conviction is Pragyan School's desired outcome.

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Website: www.pragyanschool.com

ASMITA

Location: Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Philosophy: Asmita is an institution that recognises the fact that all children do not have to learn at the same pace. Children who do not find a place in mainstream schools because of their slower pace of learning are helped by Asmita to make the transition gracefully and rejoin the mainstream schools.

What is different? One day, when Dr Krishna Dutt (the future founder of Asmita) was travelling by train, he observed two children of a lady co-passenger with interest. Noticing the repeated snubs that the girl, Asmita, received from her brother Anil, he gently intervened. To his consternation, he found out that the girl was, in fact, older than her brother but was studying three classes below him because she had been identified as a slow learner.

This incident left a deep impact upon Dr Dutt. How many children, he mused, there must be like this! Today, Dr Dutt claims that at least 5–10 per cent of all students fall in this category. Where can children who do not fit into mainstream schools go? Fired by the urge to inspire the slow learners of society to regain their lost identity, he founded Asmita in 1989.

Catering only to slow learners (neither severely mentally retarded nor normal in their mental capacities), children are taught here until they are ready to join mainstream schools. Each child is nurtured in two ways: first, the behavioural anomalies are addressed, followed by the education of the child according to his/her abilities. A child is taught basics like article recognition,

colouring distinction, reading, writing and minor calculations—all in a playful manner.

Working hard to break the Indian mindset that consulting a psychologist is akin to going to a lunatic asylum. Asmita has on its staff six teachers, one helper, one computer instructor and one driver. A panel of visiting experts, comprising a pediatrician, psychiatrist, neurologist, physiotherapist and speech therapist, lends its expertise whenever needed.

To date, Asmita has successfully helped more than 450 students (about 75 per year) make the transition into mainstream schools.

Address: 12/357, Indira Nagar, Lucknow 22601, Uttar Pradesh

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Fax: Not available

E-mail: asmita_slc@yahoo.com

Website: www.asmita.org, admissions@asmita.org

STUDY HALL EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

Location: The school is located in a residential area, very close to the Ambedkar Stadium in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.

Philosophy: Children are unique, powerful, important persons worthy of our respect. They have a right to enjoy their childhood, which is an important phase of their lives in itself and deserves to be understood respectfully rather than treated simply as a preparation for adulthood.

What is different? Parents give their time to their child's class. They are invited on a specific day—once a term—to share their knowledge and skills with all the children in their child's class. There are no exams till Class VII. There is no ranking system all the way till Class X. Competition is seriously discouraged and collaboration is promoted by using group study as a regular feature of the classroom.

Study Hall resulted from Dr Urvashi Sahni and Mrs Geeta Kumar's vision to make a creative difference in the world of education. Starting with just six students in January 1986, the school has now grown considerably. For the past 21 years, Study Hall has endeavoured to make school a happy place and not one where boys and girls feel alienated; to enable children to develop at their own

pace without the fear and humiliation of unfair comparison with others. It ensures that children develop as confident individuals. The school also integrates children with special needs with the mainstream through their special unit called *Dosti*. These objectives are reachable with the help of nearly a hundred teachers besides a full-time on-campus counsellor who share in the joys of learning.

Creativity is the buzzword here and a cartload of co-curricular activities keeps Study Hall as busy as a beehive the year round. Swimming, basketball, cricket, volleyball, yoga, aerobics, gymnastics, outstation excursions, picnics, drama, elocution, debates, extempore speeches, computer-aided audiovisual presentations, quiz and singing in English and Hindi, and workshops in art and craft, math and science are the wheels of the project method through which curricular learning is facilitated. English, Hindi, math, environmental studies and social studies are dealt with in a challenging manner. However, the school firmly believes that children are not helped by competition as it generates unnecessary pressures and hurt, which can damage one's self-esteem. Thus, competition is discouraged.

Co-curricular activities like sports, drama, art and music are integrated into curricular activities, turning the process of learning into a happy exploration of sorts.

Besides the main school affiliated to CBSE board, the school offers examination for students of Classes X and XII from National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS).

Testing and evaluation is done only with the motive of helping the children learn better and not with the idea of passing judgement on them. There are no examinations for children till Class VII, and in higher classes, examinations are just another skill that the children are groomed to master. Children face examinations with the same excitement that they have for any other activity in school.

Children have access to well-equipped science and computer laboratories. The idyllic art room, dance room, music rooms, special education rooms, two libraries and sports hall along with the swimming pool, basketball and volleyball courts and other open spaces allow ample freedom to learn and grow.

Here, the children are divided into four houses, headed by students and teachers. Along with class activities, they indulge in a lot of activities under their respective houses. Students as prefects,

class representatives and members of the student council body are being initiated into civic responsibility of their world and make an effort to change the wrongs in the adult world.

Vidyasthali High School at Kanar (in part of the mango belt in Malihabad near Lucknow) is part of Study Hall's commitment to the rural populace. They also have several outreach programmes for computer education and for computer-aided education to facilitate computer literacy and vocational training in rural and urban slum areas.

The school also has an integrated programme for children with special needs, who are dealt with by professionals in separate classes for part of the day and spend some of their time with the children in the regular classes. This programme called Dosti is one of its kind in Lucknow, filling a great need in the city. It has been very successful so far, with parents claiming that their children are making remarkable progress.

To create a child-responsive learning environment in classrooms, the project method has proved invaluable. This involves choosing a particular theme or topic (like seasons) and weaving-in several activities and multiple subject areas in the effort to integrate and make whole all the information about the chosen topics. Children are encouraged to participate in all activities related to the theme of the project. The children and teacher throw themselves into the spirit of the project and begin by engaging in serious and extensive research about the topic in all its aspects. For weeks, encyclopedias, magazines, journals, newspapers, parents and friends are consulted in the effort to gather data both inside and outside the classrooms. Art and craft are used to express ideas generated by the children's research. Once the imagination is let loose, there is a support of creative compositions by all, taking the form of plays, poems, stories, dialogues and formal reports too. Eventually, all this material is organised in individual scrapbooks or project files, and the plays and poems are performed informally for each other or for parents in a more formal display.

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RAJGHAT BESANT SCHOOL

Location: Nestled amongst leafy groves on the outskirts of the ancient pilgrim city of Varanasi, the campus overlooks the confluence of the rivers Varuna and Ganga.

Philosophy: In the words of the founder–seer J. Krishnamurti:

The purpose, the aim and the drive of these schools is to equip the child with the most excellent technological proficiency so that he may function with clarity and efficiency in the modern world, and, far more important, to create the right climate so that the child may develop fully as a complete human being. This means giving him the opportunity to flower in goodness so that he is rightly related to people, things and ideas, to the whole of life.

What is different? In keeping with the above, the school encourages a cooperative atmosphere of learning together without rivalry, respecting each child as a unique individual not to be compared with others. It aims at the holistic development of each child. Students live on campus (except for less than a 100 day-scholars who commute to and from the city) and participate in a number of activities that enrich their residential life: biography club, sports club, environment, and such others.

Here are a few snapshots of Rajghat Besant School.

‘If Aristotle’s claim that the earth was at the centre of the universe could be accepted by people, even when no telescopes existed, why did people doubt Galileo? After all, Galileo had a telescope to prove that the sun, and not the earth, was at the centre of the Universe!’ The teacher smiles at this question raised by a child in Class VI, during the science class. ‘Well’, she explains, ‘Galileo had made a discovery that shook the beliefs of people. Religion said the earth was at the centre of the universe. Didn’t we all know how it felt when anyone shook our own dearly held beliefs?’

A lively discussion ensues on prejudice, and the science class on space turns into one on enquiry into the nature of the human mind.

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‘Why are we so afraid of examinations? What happens to us before and during an exam?’ A panel of students sits before the entire

school, in the large assembly hall, and discusses the issue with the Rector and a few teachers. As the discussion deepens, students and teachers from the audience participate in the question and answer session. Success, failure, the attachment to success and the fear of failure...issues such as these are thrown open for everyone to ponder, debate and cogitate on.

Later, a few students speak of how differently they faced the end-of-term examination.

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A few students of Class XI accompany their history teacher to the deep 'khud' by the river. Armed with pickaxes and shovels, they dig into the soil with the diligence of experienced archaeologists. Within a couple of hours, they unearth broken pots, urns and utensils, and hurry back to the class excitedly...are these more of the ninth century BC relics that were found in this very site by excavators half a century ago? Whether or not they are the historic relics, the entire experience has made the subject come alive in a way it would never have, had their teacher simply adopted the conventional mode of teaching!

An undercurrent of enquiry is present in the fabric of the place, as the philosopher and founder, J. Krishnamurti, spent many years here.

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LAKSHMI ASHRAM

Location: Set against the scenic backdrop of Trishul, Nanda Devi and other peaks of the Himalayas in Kumaon, a mountain area in the northwestern corner of Uttarakhand.

Philosophy: 'Learning by experience' is one of the principles of Basic Education.

What is different? Here is a hands-on learning experience in civics: the school has its own government, that is, the various sections of life at school are divided into 'ministries', each with its

own responsible 'minister'. Through a rotation system, it is ensured that everyone comes into contact with each section. The girls elect the ministers democratically. There is a prime minister, a minister for cultural affairs, one for kitchen affairs, one for cleaning—among other ministers! This helps the girls take responsibilities and work in an organised manner.

Lakshmi Ashram is a Basic Education school for girls, a centre of inspiration and guidance for voluntary work in the Himalayas. The ashram was started by Sarala Devi, who came to India in 1932, from England, to join Mahatma Gandhi in his movement. During her stay in India, she visited Kumaon and shortly afterwards, she began to work for the improvement of living conditions of women in the mountains. In 1946, a public servant in Kausani presented an old house to the Gandhi Movement and this enabled Sarala Devi to start the girls' school, which later became Lakshmi Ashram.

Even as you enter their campus, you find yourself in the midst of happy, smiling faces of children with their eyes full of simple innocence, welcoming you with warm affection. Whether a long-time acquaintance or a stranger, all are received with the same cheerfulness. The girls come from Kumaon, some of them from outcast families or tribal areas. Often, the oldest of them are widows or have left behind broken marriages. At present, there are about 60 girls between the ages of 5 and 18, who live here.

The ashram is spread across 11 acres of land, 6 of which are cultivated terraces. Cows are reared for milk, and both the land and the animals are taken care of by students and teachers. There is a main building with classrooms, where the girls and their teachers also sleep. In the same building is a meeting room, a dining room, a kitchen, an office and a sickroom. Beyond the washing area is a workshop for spinning and weaving activities, and a cowshed.

A typical day here begins at 4.30 a.m. with a Gandhian prayer, followed by breakfast. Practical work for students and teachers begins with looking after the cows, gathering firewood, cooking, washing and mending clothes. For one hour, everybody gathers for a lesson on sewing and spinning. These woollens and rugs are used by the ashram.

In the afternoon, learning in classrooms begins. The Ashram follows the state syllabus of the Uttarakhand board. Teaching time is

allotted about two to three hours a day, followed by an hour of self-study. Before the evening meal, all the students gather for prayers, and the various working groups report on their day's activities. Everyone is encouraged to bring forward any ideas or complaints.

Students are encouraged to appear for the examination in Classes V, VIII and X. Some girls have passed X- and XI-level examinations. Thereafter, they join the 'earn and learn' programme, where they take responsibility for one of the daily duties of the Ashram and continue to study privately till they get a degree or further.

In the classroom, the attempt is to relate textbooks with their living contexts and also to highlight the contradictions prevailing in society. Students are taught to involve themselves in social work in a non-violent way using local culture and tradition (such as music, art and drama) to generate social awareness. Students are encouraged to read newspaper articles and hold discussions. Two monthly school magazines are issued in which the girls can write about what occupies their minds.

Most of the girls are not able to pay for their stay at the Ashram. Funds come from Indian sources and friends from Denmark.

The Ashram conducts a seven month course for study and practice of Gandhian thought and lifestyle. This is for students who have passed their Class X or XII examinations and want to work with voluntary social action groups. This course takes place in Lakshmi Ashram and in Sevagram in Maharashtra. The important part of the educational system here is that teachers participate on equal terms with students in all activities.

One young girl, who finished her schooling here and is presently a volunteer, says with a beautiful smile that speaks from her heart: 'I don't know how I got to learn all these things and how it is being passed on to others. This is how life and learning is here...it just happens this way.'

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SOCIETY FOR INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT OF THE HIMALAYAS (SIDH)

Location: It is located in the Jaunpur block of the Tehri–Garhwal district in Uttarakhand, about 12 km away from Mussoorie.

Philosophy: SIDH believes that there is harmony in existence. All three categories of existence other than human beings, that is, the material order, the *pranic* order (plants and vegetation) and the order of animals and birds live in perfect harmony in coexistence with each other. Human beings have to be aware of this. This understanding comes about through education. Education should facilitate a deep understanding of the self, and interrelationship between the self and (a) the body, (b) the other (family/society), (c) Nature and (d) the rest of existence. Education or *shiksha* helps us recognise reality and live according to this understanding to be in harmony with the other, Nature and ourselves. SIDH sees education as a tool for social change because it creates a space for meaningful dialogue within individual mindsets, lifestyles and political spheres.

What is different? Among SIDH's many experiences, at present, they are experimenting with the idea of doing away with textbooks and teaching children directly from the local context.

SIDH is an NGO devoted exclusively to education. Its members offer opportunities for education to children through their schools in 35 remote mountain villages in the Tehri–Garhwal district of Uttarakhand. They also conduct studies and research into educational assumptions and methodologies and strive to bring the community of teachers together for a shared evolution.

When SIDH began their work in 1989 in the tribal area of Jaunpur, they knew that education was the key to effecting a change in society. They discovered a meaningful way to impart education through a literacy programme *Sushiksha*, which means 'good education'. Today, the village schools provide the space for trying out various experiments, which, if successful, are shared with others. The number of schools is small, but the quality keeps improving and SIDH shares their findings with the community,

other organisations and even at the policy level by disseminating the reports of seminars and research studies.

The Sushiksha programme has five components that vary according to different needs in villages:

- Eight *balwadis* or childcare centres for little children until they are 6 years old.
- Two *balshalas* or 'extended balwadis' until grade 2 or until the child is almost 7 years of age.
- Five primary schools (Classes I to V).
- *Bodhshala* or elementary school (Classes VI to VIII).
- *Tarun Sanjivani* (Classes IX to X).

Cumulatively, they run 17 schools that together serve nearly 600 children.

Balwadis were started to increase the reach of their programme. This later developed the innovative concept of Balshalas, which are essentially balwadis upgraded to Class II. This was a unique experiment and they have proved that this is an inexpensive and viable option in small, scattered hamlets in remote mountain areas. There are more girls than boys at the balwadis and balshalas.

To help children *how* to think rather than tell them *what* to think is the basis of imparting education to children and teachers. To improve the quality and relevance of education, SIDH has experimented with various teaching methodologies, curriculum development and upgrading the skills of their staff which comprises of local youths.

The curriculum of SIDH's primary schools is modified to make it more contextual. When children absorb knowledge through their own experiences, they appreciate their environment, society and traditional knowledge and feel confident. It is an integrated approach, where different subjects, especially, language, are taught with the help of locally relevant issues. It helps to increase the capacity of teachers and students to think and analyse the data collected. It also helps them to develop a holistic perception, as they are able to relate all subjects taught in school to daily life. For example, environmental science is taught through 'project work'

on 'Trees & Shrubs' and 'Our Village'. Students document these projects with the assistance of teachers. The research team organises this information to develop guidelines (for teachers) that will include the process as well as the findings. This would later assist teachers in other institutions to undertake similar projects in their areas.

From June 2007, SIDH is going to start a Gap Year School for students out of school but yet to enter college. This will expose young minds to think differently, to think out of the box.

Education is not just literacy... Textbooks are a means, not an end... Education is not only about getting a job...it is about being able to lead a happy and meaningful life.

Following their philosophy of empowering the people in the village, SIDH has formed Village Education Committees, which consist of parents. These parents are responsible for the day-to-day management of the schools—schools *of* the village, *for* the village, *by* the village.

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SHRI BHUVNESHWARI PARAYAVAN VIDHYALAYA

Location: At 6,000 feet above sea level, overlooking a wide expanse of a wooded valley dotted with many small villages, against the backdrop of the school is an oak forest from Anjanisain town, which is about 100 km from Rishikesh.

Philosophy: Based on an extract from the Upanishads: 'Knowledge is that which frees.'

What is different? Here, the distinctive feature is a holistic approach that does not compartmentalise learning; through projects and activities, many skills are exercised. For example, writing a drama will require creativity, the use of Hindi or English, knowledge of subject matter (or an opportunity to research), personal expression (including writing), confidence and teamwork.

In October 2003, the administration of Shri Bhuvneshwari Parayavan Vidhyalaya introspected: how will these young minds help our society to progress? This school, which is a part of Shri Bhuvneshwari Mahila Ashram, has removed the emphasis on 'book based' syllabus, and instead focuses on the learning levels of the children. Here, teaching a particular topic begins from the experience of the child. And, if the child has not experienced that situation, it is created. Therefore, the textbook is merely a record of experiences.

English, Hindi and math are introduced through drama. Thus, art is used as a way of encouraging personal expression and creativity, making writing in Hindi or English relevant.

This is a growing school. At present, there are 80 children with classes from KG to Class VII. The teaching staff comprises 10 teachers apart from volunteers. The syllabus prescribed by the Uttarakhand government is followed.

The school has eliminated competitive examinations and has instead introduced personalised, on going assessments and evaluations of the students. One teacher stays with a group of children (instead of different teachers for different subjects), thereby strengthening the student-teacher relationship and allowing for better understanding and communication.

Traditional punishments and rewards have been abolished. Most children are engaged in activities, and in the case of any behavioural problems, discussions and quiet reflection have become ways of promoting self-discipline.

This is a place where teachers and students are friends; both are walking the same path of learning. Without any college degrees or experience, the teachers are students as well. During a discussion on education, one teacher of Class VI was asked, 'What makes a good teacher?' She responded quickly, 'First, we must be children's friends and only then can we be their teachers.' The 10 teachers and volunteers in the school have exhaustive schedules, as they teach and at the same time, study and review the subject material.

The staff has been focussed on creating a learning community. The students and teachers (between the ages of 15 and 21) have been learning subjects like math, English, Hindi, history, singing and art through hands-on activities, which they can later use in their own classes. This training, which takes place every day after

school, also focuses on lesson planning, considering the needs and levels of the children, revolving around a certain concept.

Recently, a library was set up with over 2,000 books both in Hindi and English. There is also an audiovisual room that exposes children to the power of great films. This has served to create opportunities for thinking and writing as well as listening (especially useful for learning English). The teachers learnt how to use computers to teach their students.

Occasionally, the children teach the teachers, and in these magical moments, the idea of holistic education becomes clear.

Children are given the freedom to be children; they have the freedom to run, play, climb, sing and dance. They have the freedom to be students, explorers, discoverers, inventors, magicians, scientists, mathematicians and actors. They have the freedom because they themselves want to be here.

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SIKSHA-NIKETAN

Location: About 90 km from Kolkata in Kalanabagram in Burdwan District, West Bengal.

Philosophy: Siksha-Niketan is based on Mahatma Gandhi's vision of an educational system where basic education should be imparted to the youth of Independent India through work.

What is different? Do not be surprised to see an 11-year-old weaving with such expertise that the final product is sold to support the school activities! Or a 13-year-old involved in the administration of his school!

Under the umbrella of Siksha-Niketan are schools that focus on children whose parents work long hours and therefore cannot take care of them at home. These schools are segregated according to different age groups:

- **Shishu Lalani** is a crèche for children up to three years old. Especially in poor families, mothers leave their small children to be looked after by their older siblings who, therefore, cannot attend school. From six in the morning till four in the evening, Shishu Lalani gives quality care to the children. They are fed, bathed and treated for any illness. In addition, they are given rudimentary lessons at the crèche.
- **Manjusha Tarangini Sishu Bhavana** is a pre-basic school for 3- to 6-year olds. This school works from seven in the morning till three in the afternoon. Most students have parents who work in the fields and return home late at night. These students are given lunch and dinner. Learning is made fun through singing rhymes, art, games and gardening.
- **Acharya Pramathanath Buniyadi Vidyalaya** is a coeducational junior basic school for children aged 6–11 years, that is, Classes I to V. Classes take place from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon. Time is spent in encouraging children to work with their hands. Apart from learning the 3 Rs, all students help in cooking meals and eat lunch together. At present, extra-curricular work includes the cultivation of flowers and vegetables, weaving of thread and cloth bags.
- **Aurobindo Prakash Vidyanatan** is a coeducational senior basic school for children aged 12–14 years. In the three years of instruction that students receive from this school, importance is given to regular studies as well as productive work. Since this takes more time than in a conventional school, the school is kept open over two sessions in the morning and afternoon. Productive skills taught are basic agriculture, flower and vegetable gardening, weaving, knitting, music and art. Apart from this, they are involved in helping the administration of the school.
- **Rabindra Mukta Vidyalaya** is a 'state open school' for children who wish to pursue studies after a gap. Students whose educational proficiency level is at Class VIII are eligible for admission to this school. There is no age limit and classes are held twice a week, usually on weekends.

In line with Gandhiji's vision for character building through work, children from Class I onwards are encouraged to be self-sufficient.

The proceeds from the sale of their handiwork helps to support the school activities.

Siksha-Niketan has two hostels for boys and girls. There are four libraries that network with 10 branch libraries located in neighbouring villages.

Education does not mean knowledge of letters but it means character building, it means knowledge of duty. Our own word literally means 'training'.

—*Mahatma Gandhi*

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SWANIRVAR

Location: Of the three schools run by Swanirvar, two are inside villages, while the third is on the main road, just 10 km from the border of Bangladesh.

Philosophy: Swanirvar aims to reinterpret the Gandhi-Tagore vision of education in today's context. Its vision is to evolve alternative rural primary schools, where children acquire the basic skills, competencies, democratic spirit and sensitivity to social and ecological issues. Children, parents and the whole community are encouraged to actively participate in running the three schools of Swanirvar.

What is different? A group of eager researchers descended on Magurkhali, a village in Baduria block of North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. They sought out some of the oldest people and enquired about a river that used to flow nearby: how, with some sluice gates the water was controlled, and later changing its course, the river totally vanished from the village; how the livelihood patterns changed because of this...these researchers recorded their findings, drew pictures and maps and made charts. Who were these geographers, sociologists and historians?—students of Class IV of Swanirvar primary school in Andharmanik.

In another village, Chandalati, the primary students got their parents and all the other villagers involved in arguing and discussing the origins of the name of their village. In these schools, the parents, who are most often poor and illiterate, are encouraged to come, visit and watch their children putting together the pieces of their findings. Here, education is a process where the whole community gets involved.

Presently, Swanirvar has three schools spread over three villages—Andharmanik, Chandalati and Fatullapur. With 40 students in a class, Swanirvar defies the assumption that innovation is possible only when students' strengths are kept small in each class. Learning from others who have also worked out innovative courses and textbooks, these schools teach local studies using their own history book as well as Digantar's book *Apne Aas Paas* (which Swanirvar has translated into Bengali). *Sahitya Sabha*, a cultural programme where children perform and conduct the entire proceedings, was picked up from *Patha Bhavan*, Santiniketan. Some of the items are the childrens' own compositions.

Parents are an important part of Swanirvar's work and philosophy. Twice a year, they are invited to a workshop in two batches (parents of children in Classes I and II, and parents of children in Classes III and IV) to actually 'do' some of the things (regarding local studies) that the children will 'do' in class. This is done so that they also understand the new content and methods. In these workshops, the parents are also shown how to make teaching/learning materials. Some of the materials made by the parents are actually used in the classroom.

Children do more than just learn from the teachers here. They help run the place! There are four children's committees for (a) cleaning the building and toilets, (b) running the library, (c) preparing and conducting the *sahitya sabha* and (d) managing games materials and activities. Recently a fifth forum was formed to review the performance of these four committees.

The evaluative procedures, too, reflect the underlying philosophy of Swanirvar. There is continuous evaluation and also formal exams but with a large number of 'non-text' questions to test the actual competencies. The report card has been made to reflect the 'all-round' development of the child.

And these schools wonder—Can all children, all communities in all villages be thus transformed? And with Bernard Shaw, Swanirvar feels like saying:

You see things as they are and ask: 'Why?'
We dream of things that never were, and say: 'Why not?'

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LORETO DAY SCHOOL (LDS)

Location: Sealdah, opposite to one of the two large railway stations in Kolkata, West Bengal.

Philosophy: In cherishing the most deprived of God's children and enabling them to take their place with dignity among the others, this school aims to become truly a place where the Glory of God is manifested.

What is different? This is a school that a child would want to call 'home'—a home where children from financially well-off families integrate comfortably with those from poor backgrounds.

'Our doors are always open'. This typifies the attitude at LDS which has become a resource centre for poor children, while attracting children from higher income groups. Since 1979, 50 per cent of its initial intake has been from the poorest children of the slum areas, for whom the school provides free tuition, food, clothing, rent and medicine. The other 50 per cent are from well-off homes, and can afford to pay a fee that gives stability to the institution.

In LDS, the medium of instruction is English for about 1,400 students and 43 teachers. In this uniquely integrated school, there is no competition amongst students; they compete with themselves and not against each other and, hence, there is no ranking system and no comparisons.

The school is affiliated to the Higher Secondary Board of Education, West Bengal. It prepares pupils for the Madhyamik

Pariksha (Secondary Examination) of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and the Uchcha Madhyamik Pariksha of the Council of Higher Secondary Education, West Bengal. In addition to the subjects prescribed by the Board and Council syllabi, the curriculum includes the following: Religious instruction (for Catholics only), value education, art, handicrafts, choral singing and Indian dancing. Bengali is taught as a second language from Class I. A third language, Hindi, is compulsory from Classes VII to Class VIII. The school is an examination centre for National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS), whose examinations it prepares its pupils for.

The school firmly believes that learning is not confined to the classroom. In an effort to relate their learning to life, students are taken on educational tours and occasional live-ins when appropriate.

Teachers are trained in different approaches to teaching. One such method is called 3 X, where the focus is on

- the child's experiences,
- experiments with what s/he learns and
- further exploration into the topic.

How can students build a more ethical society if they are allowed to ignore their peer groups? In addition to LDS, there are other programmes run by the same management. One such, *the Rainbow Programme*, encourages children from LDS to work with street children, preparing them for mainstreaming into Bengali medium government schools. It exposes the students from higher income groups to situations of a poor community that they may have not really been aware of or concerned about. These children get first-hand experience of helping another child from less privileged circumstances. Loreto Sealdah trains its students (from the age of 10) to tackle this problem at their own level. At present, 600 secondary students are trained and challenged to see children from poor communities as equals and treat them with dignity. Mentally and physically challenged children are welcomed with open arms. Besides children, LDS feeds old and abandoned widows. Children observe how the staff responds to those from various backgrounds and they learn to accept one another. So, it is in practice that they learn compassion and when they are in trouble they, too, are treated kindly.

Rainbow Homes is another programme for girls from very poor backgrounds who do not have a safe place to stay. These girls are given the security of a home life and also attend schools along with their well-off peers.

Compassion and acceptance are life's most important skill that children are taught here first-hand.

On a birthday card, the students of Class XII had this to say about the Rainbow Programme: 'Village work is not about walking long distances...it is about walking into people's hearts.' Another message reads: 'We believe that we have just created ripples in the water...the wave is yet to come!'

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VIKRAMSHILA EDUCATION RESOURCE SOCIETY

Location: In the village Bigha located in the Burdwan District of West Bengal.

Philosophy: Imparting quality education to all children; equity based education spread over the entire social fabric is the only way to seal the divide between the poor and the rich.

What is different? Police stations turned into classrooms! Children trained to teach those on the streets...

In the late 1980s, Vikramshila Education Resource Society started with the aim of improving the quality of non-formal education provided by NGOs. They later started an experimental Lab School in Bigha. In this village, a community education programme has been set up under which a comprehensive package of educational activities is offered to about 275 children.

Apart from learning the 3 Rs, the children are involved in the Environment Education Programme. This is where trained volunteers guide the children in various kinds of activities so that they become sensitised to environmental issues such as land use pattern in the village, biodegradable and non-biodegradable material, cropping practices and management of water resources through practical activity.

Theme teaching is one method of approaching the school syllabus from a different angle. Here is how they do it: choosing a topic or theme is the first step. As an example, 'colour' is chosen. Then, efforts are made to look at how one theme can integrate subjects like history, geography, math, literature and language. A discussion is held on colours in Nature. Why is the sky blue or what makes the clouds black? The door opens to the world of science, where such questions are asked and answered. Stories are told using appropriate adjectives to describe colours like 'electric blue' or 'midnight black'. Or this discussion can lead to the symbolic use of colours, as in a traffic signal.

Another education-based initiative is *Nabadisha Education Programme* for street children. Every day, this programme touches the lives of 1,800 street and slum children of Kolkata. The target is to provide an all-round basic education to enable them to join the societal mainstream. The programme was started keeping in view the two vital rights of children—development and participation. What makes the programme unique is the involvement of the police. Currently, they have 24 centres spread in 20 police stations all over the city and its suburbs where classes are held for approximately 1,800 children (4–14 age group) who have been denied access to formal schooling.

In a Nabadisha centre, children are divided into groups according to their learning levels and not their ages. The grouping is flexible because some are school dropouts and have some residual learning, while most are without any knowledge of letters or numbers. The entire approach is learner-centric and participatory. Besides academics, these children participate in sports, drama, puppetry, music, art, craft and even juggling. Emphasis is given to hygiene, discipline and positive work habits, so that they can join the societal mainstream. Besides classroom activities, they conduct parents' meetings on a regular basis and make home visits to strengthen contact with the community. They also maintain regular contact with the local community leaders and police officers.

The Titli School has been running since 1996 in the St. Xavier's collegiate school with assistance from Vikramshila. It is a child-to-child programme, where the senior boys of St. Xavier's participate in the process of educating 120 underprivileged children within the age group of 4–14 years. Of these children, 10–15 per cent are promoted to mainstream formal schools, including St. Xavier's School. Pre-vocational training is also carried out for children between

12 and 13 years, through which they learn various skills such as tailoring, art and craft, banner writing, carpentry and clay modelling.

To sustain the use of innovative learning in schools, teachers are trained at the institute managed by Vikramshila Education Resource Society.

Address: 77 Maharaja Tagore Road, Dhakuria, Kolkata 700031, West Bengal

Telephone: +91-33-24299489, 30926084

Fax: Not available

E-mail: contact@vikramshila.org

Website: www.vikramshila.org

SHIKSHAMITRA

Location: Housed in a first floor apartment that was once the office of the National Open School of Kolkata, Shikshamitra is conveniently located in the Chetla area of Kolkata, just 1 km from the Kalighat Metro station.

Philosophy: Shikshamitra is an attempt to combine the vision of Gandhi–Tagore with the deschooling and network learning ideas of Ivan Illich in today's urban context. It aims to evolve an alternative urban secondary school, from which the majority will go for vocations or vocational courses.

What is different? A group of eager young children can be seen interviewing septuagenarians and octogenarians. Do you wonder why? This is their way of learning history: their own and their ancestors'! (They finally bring out a booklet comprising their own personal history as well as the history of the local area.) Yet another is sketching the leaves on campus as part of the science lesson while some are seen mapping the directions to and from their school as part of the geography lesson.

Shikshamitra is being called an Open Learning Centre, where children (of different ages) as well as adults can come to learn and teach. With no prescribed textbooks for academics, the school dips into all kinds of books; like those brought out by Eklavya, Digantar, Delhi SCERT, DRCSC environment series, story books, various science activity books and any other suitable materials.

The school lays equal stress on academics, physical fitness, arts–aesthetics and working with one's hands. Singing, dance, art,

theatre, meditation, clay work, going into the locality to investigate and use of the library form an integral part of the school's routine. Multilingual communication skills are a major focus, and science and social studies (with much reduced information load) are practical and action-oriented, based on local studies. Students of this school are encouraged to be socially, politically and ecologically active. Presently, going from Classes I to V, no class has more than 15 students. The school was scheduled to formally design and test its first batch of students in April 2006.

Don't be surprised if you walk into a classroom in the afternoon that is rather unusual in its course content: a magician is taking classes in magic performance!

Address: 62 B Alipore Road, Chetla, Kolkata 700027, West Bengal

Telephone: +91-33-2479-9271, 98300-61057 (Sudeshna)

Fax: Not available

E-mail: shikshamitra@yahoo.co.in, sujit568@vsnl.com

Website: Not available

PATHA BHAVANA

Location: Amidst leafy groves and natural beauty, this century-old brainchild of Rabindranath Tagore, Patha Bhavana, is located in Santiniketan, West Bengal.

Philosophy: Patha Bhavana is a school established by Rabindranath Tagore, whose educational efforts at the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1901, were ground-breaking in many areas. He was one of the first in India to argue against the colonisation of human thoughts in evolving an educational system that aims at freedom of mind in a rural backdrop, away from confining structures and in close proximity with natural elements.

What is different? Amartya Sen matriculated in 1947 from Patha Bhavana, an open-air school in Santiniketan, where classes are held under trees. The school's founder, Tagore, wanted the learning process to break free of 'narrow domestic walls'.

Poet-educator Tagore, as a socio-educational ideologue reversed the contemporary urban centricity by locating his school in rural Bengal that now has grown into a suburb around the University. Within a logical framework of addressing the cost of education with innovation, the school, since its inception, uses the

shade of trees as 'classrooms'. Science classes for the senior students are held in roofed labrooms. Classes under the trees certainly open typical pedagogic innovations within a democratic and child-centred framework.

Democratically elected self-government activities include various programmes in the school to connect the children with the life of the villages around. The school celebrates communion with Nature through seasonal festivals throughout the year. In celebrating such festivals, the school has a repertoire of more than 2,000 secular songs praising Nature and its bounty, penned by poet Tagore. The school's annual day coincides with *Paush Mela*, held in the month of December, bringing urban people close to rural folk. Rural artisans bring their wares to the fair, while urban relatives set up stalls, so that rural people can buy the new industrially produced goods that are revolutionising life in the cities.

Patha Bhavana strives to set an example in teaching standards by following an innovative curriculum of joyful learning, which aims to inspire the creative and scientific temperament of the children. Ritualised and non-denominational *upasana* are offered every Wednesday, which again is the weekly off day for the school.

The medium of instruction is Bengali at the primary level and bilingual from post-primary classes. The school runs up to Class X. The examination is continuous and comprehensive in nature. Regarding extracurricular and co-curricular activities, the school follows an inclusive policy. Such a policy facilitates students in opting for their desired careers. Every Tuesday, 'literary meetings' are organised by the children, where original and creative expression is encouraged.

Student self-government is known as *Ashram Sammilani*, which gives the students a sense of empowerment. Senior students are actively engaged in taking even disciplinary action with the help of the teachers.

There is no annual examination. Students from Class VIII sit for 'Practice Examination' sessions to test their abilities in writing examination papers, which helps them in the secondary examination. The secondary level qualifying examination is conducted by Viswa Bharati. Competition is not encouraged among the students.

Address: Adhyaksha, Patha Bhavana, Viswa Bharati, Santiniketan 731235,
West Bengal

Telephone: +91-3463-262751

Fax: Not available

E-mail: root@vbharat.ernet.in

Website: www.visva-bharati.ac.in

NOTES

¹ Waldorf education enriches the daily learning experience with rhythm and ritual. The Waldorf education sequence includes kinesthetic activities, oral language presentations, lesson imaging and artistic activities. For more information, please visit www.pythagacus.com.

² Karnataka Parents' Association for Mentally Retarded Citizens, AMH Compound, Off Hosur Road, Near Kidwai Hospital, Bangalore 560029. Telephone: +91-80-26564608, E-mail: jpkpamrc@vsnl.net.

³ Edward De Bono is the author of several books on thinking skills.

⁴ Stephen Covey is the author of the best-selling book. *Seven Habits of Successful People*.

⁵ KPM Approach: K. Padmanabha Menon Approach—for more details please visit website www.kpmapproach.org

⁶ This concept was proposed by Mahatma Gandhi, who called it Nai Taleem or Basic Education. This is not formal education that qualifies one with a formal degree, but is functional education, which allows the individual to acquire good values and character building.

⁷ Dyscalculia: difficulty in reading and understanding numbers.

⁸ Vigyan Ashram has started a project to evolve a holistic development process for the children of most deprived nomadic tribes through Basic Education and 'Life Skills Training'. For details, please visit www.vigyanashram.com.

⁹ ACCORD: Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development, Gudalur, an integrated development organisation working with the Adivasis.

Appendix

The following is a complete list of schools that Girls Education Plus contacted during the course of the development of the Directory of Alternative Schools in India. As already mentioned in the Introduction, for various reasons, this entire list could not be included in the Directory. A subset of these schools appears in our Directory, but we are furnishing the entire list here for our readers' reference.

ANDHRA PRADESH

Abhaya School
Centre for Learning (CFL)
Chinnabadi
Diksha—A Waldorf School
Future Kids School
Jarsangam
Lakshya (part of Blooming Buds School)
Neel Bagh
Pachasaale
Rishi Valley Education Centre
Rishi Valley Education Centre (rural schools)
Sadhana Vidya Nilayam
Satsang Vidyalaya
Sloka, the Steiner School
Sumavanam Village School
The Noble School
Timbaktu Collective
Vidyaranya

BIHAR

Raghunandan High School

GUJARAT

Anand Niketan
Balghar

Eklavya Education Foundation
Shreyas
The Riverside School

KARNATAKA

Ananya Shikshana Kendra
Association for India's Development (AID)
Bala Balaga Creative Education Trust
Bhavya
Brindavan Education Centre
Centre for Learning (CFL)
Deena Bandhu Primary School
Gear Innovative International School
Jyothy English Medium School
Namma Shaale
Poorna Learning Centre
Prakriya Green Wisdom School
Sameeksha
Silver Queen Public School
Sita School, Society for Educational Exploration
The Poorna Pragnya Learning Centre
The TVS Academy
The Valley School (KFI)
Vikasana School
Vistar

KERALA

Gurukul Botanical Sanctuaray
Kanavu
Pallikoodam School
Pazhassi Raja Tribal School
Sri Atmananda Memorial School
The Choice School
The Gurukul

LADAKH

Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh

MAHARASHTRA

Aksharnandan
Anand Niketan
Anand Sankul
Bal Anand
Gram-Mangal
The Pragat Shikshan Sanstha's Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan
Khelghar
Nath Valley School
N.G. Naralkar Foundaton
Pragati Shikshan Sanstha
Sahyadri School
Tridha Rudolf Steiner School
Vigyan Ashram—Rural Development Education System (RDES)

NEW DELHI

Ankur—Society for Alternatives in Education
Bluebells School International
Butterflies
Deepalaya School
Eavenir (The Future), The Gnostic Centre
Manzil
Mirambika
Prayas Institute for Juvenile Justice
Salam Balak Trust
Sanskriti School
Vigyan Vijay Foundation

ORISSA

Ruchika Social Service Organization (RSSO)

PONDICHERRY

Bright's High School
Primrose School
Sathyalayam School
Sri Aurobindo International Center for Education (SAICE)

RAJASTHAN

Barefoot College
Bodh Shikshan Samiti (Bodhshaale)
Digantar
Shikshantar
Vidya Bhawan Senior Secondary School and Vidya Bhawan Public School

TAMIL NADU

Abacus Montessori School
After School
Alpha to Omega
Anugriha Charitable Trust (Shikshyatan)
Ashram Matriculation High School
The Children's Garden School
Deepanam School
Footsteps
Future School
Headstart School
Ilaignarkal School
Inner Harmony
Isai Ambalam School
Mahakavi Bharathiyar Higher Secondary School
New Creation School
Puvudham Learning Centre
Roots
Sholai School
Tamil Ulaygam
The Future Foundation
The School
The Sundaram School
The T.S. Srinivasan Center for Vocational and Advanced Training
The TVS Academy and The Center for Rural Training
The TVS Educational Society
Thulir
Transition School
Vidyodaya School

UTTARAKHAND

Bhuvneshwari Mahila Ashram
Central Himalayan Rural Action Group (CHIRAG)
Lakshmi Ashram
Nachiket
Society for Integrated Development of the Himalayas (SIDH)

UTTAR PRADESH

Asmita
Pragyan School
Rajghat Besant School
Study Hall Educational Foundation

WEST BENGAL

Akshar
Kajla
Loreto Day School
Patha Bhavana
Shikshamitra
Siksha-Niketan
Swanirvar
Vikramshila Educational Resource Society



Illustration by Ayisha Abraham

About the Editors and Contributors

EDITORS

Sarojini Vittachi was born in India, studied at the London School of Economics, and undertook research in the 1960s on poverty groups in the East End of London and in Oldham, an old industrial revolution town in the Midlands. On her return to India she worked on rural development and travelled widely to rural and tribal areas. She worked for UNICEF for over two decades, was posted to many countries, working on development programmes, and retired as the Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa covering 22 countries. She then did an assignment in Gaza as a part of the peace initiative between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Her experience has suggested that education, particularly of girls, is a critical key to improvements in the health and well-being of the family. She now lives in Bangalore and is part of an advocacy group on girls' education.

Neeraja Raghavan completed her doctorate in chemistry from Princeton University, USA and returned to India, to divide her time thereafter between industrial R&D and pursuing her passion, teaching children. Having been a freelance writer for several years now, she has written over seventy articles in leading newspapers and magazines. Editor of a CD on Understanding Religions, she is also an author of three books *Curiouser & Curiouser* (Full Circle 2004), *I Wonder Why* (CBT, 2004), and *I Wonder How* (CBT, 2007). Member of the NCERT Syllabus Review Committee and Textbook Development Committee 2006, she is currently settled in Bangalore where she works as an educational consultant and freelance writer. Her interests include music, reading and writing.

Kiran Raj is a commerce graduate with a passion for writing, teaching and children. Her varied work experience includes a few years in the corporate sector, the NGO sector (where she did some content writing for websites and educational programmes) as well

as in schools in India (where she taught and developed new teaching aids and modules). She is currently engaged as a technical writer, and she works out of Bangalore where she is settled.

CONTRIBUTORS

G. Gautama works at *The School*, Krishnamurti Foundation, India, in Chennai, and has been the Principal of the school for the past 17 years. He has a Bachelor's degree in Engineering from IIT, Madras and worked as a research scientist and a project consultant before turning to work in the field of Education. He has written several articles for *The Hindu* on educational matters and authored a book on Raja Yoga Pranayama and two textbooks on Environmental Studies. He has been touched by the teachings of Shri J. Krishnamurti and has been attempting to work at the school in line with the Founder's vision.

Deepti Priya Mehrotra's background straddles the disciplines of economics, philosophy and political science. Her post-doctoral research with the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi was on the theme Gender, Power and Knowledge. She has worked in alternative education institutions including Mobile Creche, Ankur and Mirambika Free Progress School; documented and evaluated several educational initiatives, and researched the impact of gender discrimination on girls' lives in government-run schools. Her writings include *Home Truths: Stories of Single Mothers* (Penguin, 2003), *A Passion for Freedom* (IGNCA, 2005), *Western Philosophy and Indian Feminism* (Aravali), and *Bharatiya Mahila Andolan* (Books for Change—Hindi, 2002). She currently teaches at Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi

Asha Sudarshan has a Master's degree in Education and 29 years of rich experience in the field of education. Having been a teacher for the first four of these 29 years, she then went on to head various schools (as Vice Principal and then as Principal) in Bangalore as well as in the Sultanate of Oman. Her varied experience impelled her to start her own school, which she began as a Kindergarten in her own residence in 1995. Slowly, it expanded and she now runs an alternative school which is featured in this compilation. With the inclusion of specially abled children being a

key feature of her school, the explorations into flexible baselines and facilitating of examinations is something that is ongoing here. This is one live example of a school which realises the importance of learning how to take examinations even while focussing on learning through exploration and fun.

Unfortunately, the Karnataka State Government forced its closure recently, at the time of this book going into press, due to the school being an English medium one. Asha, however, is confident that she will revive her school to the satisfaction of all concerned, soon.

Indira Vijaysimha has been running an alternative school *Poorna Learning Centre* in Bangalore since 1993. Having taught in some mainstream institutions prior to this, she had a fair amount of experience as a teacher. However, as a mother, she felt compelled to take her children out of the mainstream school that they were in, and explore with them what meaningful education was. Her earliest discussions with them were recorded in her journal, and when they were invited by the editors of this volume to share her experience, she readily agreed.

